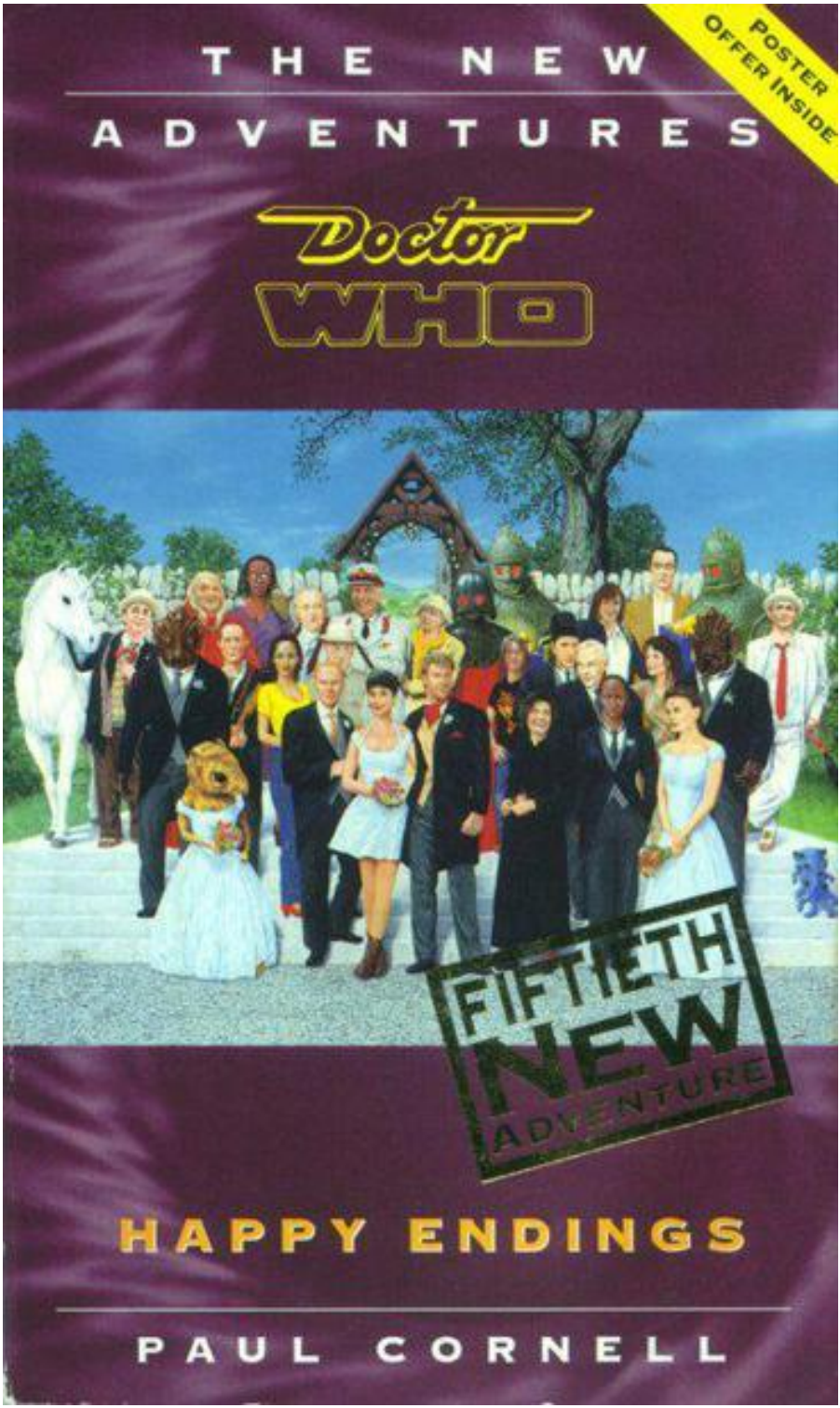
THE NEW ADVENTURES

POSTER OFFER INSIDE

Doctor WHO

# HAPPY ENDINGS

PAUL CORNELL




‘Doctor, this is my fiance. Please don’t kill him.’

You are cordially invited to the wedding of Mr Jason Kane and Professor Bernice S. Summerfield, to be held in the village of Cheldon Bonniface in the year 2010.

If everything works out, that is. Between rows, fights and pre-emptive divorce proceedings, there may not be a wedding at all. Especially if there really is someone who wants to prevent it happening.

Everybody's coming: from the Ice Warriors to UNIT veterans, a flirtatious Ace to a suspicious Hamlet Macbeth – and a very confused trio of Isley Brothers.

The Doctor has to organize a buffet, Roz has a mystery to solve, and Chris has a girlfriend who used to be the Timewyrm.

The fiftieth New Adventure, this celebratory book ties up plot threads from the previous novels, features guest appearances from well-loved characters, and includes a chapter written by many of the series' favourite authors.

**PAUL CORNELL** is one of the most popular and prolific authors in the New Adventures series.

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HAPPY ENDINGS

Paul Cornell

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*Evan Dowe (not the author of* Managra *)* – the music.

*Rebecca (mad mod poet god) Levene* – who took the original idea far too seriously.

Parts of this book were written at the Fitzroy Tavern. Obviously.

And to all my friends, for their love and patience.

And thanks to Mum and Dad, for Bread and Butter and Honey.

'Everybody's Welcome at the Wedding' was written by, in order of appearance: Mark Gatiss, Daniel Blythe, Daniel O'Mahony, Ben Aaronovitch, Lance Parkin, Gary Russell, Steve Lyons, Dave Stone, Justin Richards, Gareth Roberts, David A.McIntee, Christopher Bulis, Paul Leonard, Kate Orman, Peter Darvill-Evans, Nigel Robinson, John Peel, Marc Platt, Simon Messingham, David Banks, Andrew Cartmel, Andy Lane, Andrew Hunt, Terrance Dicks and Neil Penswick.

*Peter C. . . you nearly missed it. You can't get away as easily as that.*

*'Bye!*

*For Alison Lawson*

**In The Words of David Cassidy. . .**

The boudoir incident that had Antoinette bewitched, The careless mug of cocoa that almost had him hitched, The furrowed brow on Delphon that meant betrothal to a prince, And wisely, the Doctor has avoided all such situations since.

Companions, though, have been less than careful in resisting such attraction, And signal their departure by slowing down the action, Not by fainting, twisting ankles, whilst evading signs of danger, But like our archaeologist, going gooey for a stranger.

You are cordially invited to attend a wedding feast, To witness the marital union of Jason and Bernice.

But true love can be disastrous, as the Doctor's demonstrated, And whilst some never find Mr Right, others are inundated.

One went through a fair few men before she finally chose; She'd be about to leave and then, some blond bloke would propose; Seduced over mushrooms whilst discussing toxic scares, King Peladon offered horrors of kids with purple hair.

Jo, though, wouldn't consider Izlyr as a warm, attractive host, Some say it was Savaar's helmet that attracted Benny most.

Susan tempted Aztecs and David Campbell followed, Peri got Yrcanos so she's probably been swallowed.

How Leela fell for Andred we are given no indication; Billy left with Delta to increase her population; Kassia and Tremas had a raucous nuptial do,

And Grendel just planned weddings which continually fell through.

The Brigadier won his Doris after numerous hotel dates; Marrying Saphadin for peace Joanna would not contemplate.

For George, Charles Cranleigh's love of Ann was not the best of news, And Susan stayed with David, so the Doctor took her shoes.

Ballroom-dancing Benton put his Mavis in a huff; The Master showed the Atlantean Queen he's real hypnotic stuff; Jo Grant eventually went for brains (amazing though it seems)–

Mike Yates lost out to Clifford Jones, the Welshman of his dreams.

Petra warmed Greg Sutton up, but he very nearly blew it; Failing to win Jobel's heart, Tasambeker stabbed him through it.

Vira still loved Noah but she wasn't quite his kind, And Marriner wanted Tegan, but only for her mind.

Staying behind in Troy established Vicki as a myth; For Giuliano, love was mirrored, for he looked just like Miss Smith.

But all these lives and loves look tame compared to our false Professor's, Who lives her life at twice the pace of all her predecessors.

With over forty chapters, Benny's life reads like a thriller: Her diary tells of zombies, gods, assassins and guerrillas.

We learnt about her passions for the Twentieth Century, But we never met her dad, wherever he might be.

Sensopaths and Vampires, Oxford, darkness, blood and fire, Sheldukher and Olleril, the great Aztec Empire, All aboard the *Schirron Dream*, Menaxus, Shadowfell –

Miss Summerfield has done it all, Medieval France as well.

Doctor Watson Benny found a shameful, wicked flirt, And dangerous at twenty feet to anything in a skirt.

Haiti 1914, Artefact and Peladon,

Monks and punks and German spies – her journal carries on.

Warlock, the Supreme One, London in the Seventies, All subject to our academic's curiosities.

Guests from past and future will see Bernice and Jason wed, Gastropods with buttonholes, cravated quadrupeds, Tailcoats with tails protruding, grunts for glasses to be refilled, Martian guests complaining that champagne has not been chilled.

And notably absent certain malicious pepperpots Who never go to weddings and have avoided fifty plots, And the Doctor, by the vol-au-vents, behind the Hula Hoops, Awaiting Happy Endings. . . one more fledgling flies the coop.

**Vanessa Bishop**

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The Wrong Kind of Snow

Lady President Romanadvoratrelundar of Gallifrey settled back into the chair behind the big desk with a little toss of her hair. She patted the ornate chair arms and smiled sweetly at the stocky man who stood impassively by the office door. 'What an enormous and well-appointed chair it is, Castellan Spandrell.

I can almost see why somebody would want to be President.'

'It is not too late to change your mind, Lady President,' Spandrell rumbled.

'The election was a very close thing. Or so I would guess. I am not

officially allowed to know.'

'So?' Romana pushed a stray hair back from her brow.

'Fifty-three per cent to forty-seven. A surprise result.' He sighed deeply.

'Which means, of course, that it should not be a surprise to anybody. The Interventionists were seen in the lobbies.'

'I promised a kinder, gentler Gallifrey. They expect me to involve the Time Lords in the affairs of the universe. Should I?'

Spandrell shrugged: slowly, portentously, like a tectonic plate shifting.

'There are,' he concluded, 'a few small things that might need doing. Your predecessor would doubtless have got round to them. . . ' His voice trailed off into a diplomatic grumble.

'If she hadn't been found drunk in charge of the Sash of Rassilon, yes. I have a few things that I'd like to do myself.' Romana stood up and put her hand to her chin. 'I'd like an embassy for the Tharils. As a fellow timefaring race, we should be treating them with respect.'

'As you wish,' said Spandrell.

'Do you have a strategy report for me? I think I should consult such a thing before we go any further. Besides, I've always wanted to see one.'

'Strategy report.' Spandrell produced a computer pad from a pocket of his voluminous robe, and tapped in a code. He cleared his throat. 'The sensor buoys placed around the dimension of fictional icons report that the former Land of Fiction is still a void, as we rendered it.'

'Perhaps now would be a good time to reform it, and annex it to the Matrix.'

The corner of Spandrell's mouth twitched. 'Historically, the Land of Fiction has *always* been part of the Matrix.'

Romana looked at him seriously. 'If I start talking like that, you must shoot me, Spandrell. Forget the Land. What's next?'

1

'There have been no sightings of the Great Old Ones or Legion. No

Guardians or higher Eternals to speak of.'

'What about our gods? Death and Time and such?'

Spandrell coughed, deeply and diplomatically. 'When I referred to higher Eternals, that term is usually taken to include –'

'Oh fiddlesticks, Spandrell, fiddlesticks! You don't have to split hairs with me. I'm not embarrassed that around a quarter of our population worships another species. At least it gives them something to do. Now go on. What of the Artefact?'

'It has still not reappeared.' Spandrell tapped another button on his pad and adopted a fixed and very false smile, clearly something else that he'd learnt from his time under Flavia. 'And finally, there are traces of a Fortean Flicker right across the Stellarian Galaxy.'

'A Fortean Flicker?' Romana stared at Spandrell, grinning. A Fortean Flicker was a powerful wave of uncausality that rippled through the universe, causing bizarre effects wherever it went. They were often dangerous, but always fun, and that particular combination appealed to Romana. 'Can we localize the source?'

'I'll see to it, Lady President.' Spandrell pushed a few buttons, sending orders to the temporal scanning section.

'Fortean Flickers are very rare,' Romana mused. 'Just the sort of thing we should be investigating if we're aiming to become more involved in the affairs of the cosmos.'

Spandrell's pad beeped. 'I have the location now, Lady President.'

'Well, let's go and see, shall we?'

'Give me a moment to organize a Presidential Guard.'

Romana gently caught Spandrell's hand before he could use the pad again.

'No, Castellan. I'm used to operating with one or two companions. You'll find that I'm a very hands-on President. I'm sure you'll be able to take care of me.'

Spandrell rumbled another sigh. 'As you wish, Lady President.'

The planet had a grey-green, troubled sky. Romana's TARDIS, disguised as a beach hut, looked entirely out of place under it, but the

scene that had greeted her and Spandrell when they'd left it was, if anything, more bizarre.

A group of raggedly dressed humans were being fired on by a group of mechanically aided turtle creatures on all fours. That alone was something you didn't see every day. But the scene was frozen, a pink energy bolt hanging in front of a female human. A brown film of dust was suspended above a deadly-looking cluster of pellets close to the battlefield. A flickering blue light covered the whole scene, extending to a silver sphere that sat snugly in a crevice on one side of the valley. Romana carefully picked it up.

2

'A slow time converter,' she breathed. 'Its kronos element must be malfunctioning, causing the Fortean Flicker.' She flicked open the casing of the sphere and peered inside. 'It's been repaired, but the dimensional rectifier's shorting out. When was the last recorded Flicker?'

'During the Feast of Omega, last year,' Spandrell muttered, looking as intrigued as it was possible for him to look. 'I remember it distinctly. All the candles on the Lady President's table turned into soft cheese. The smell of burning dairy products was everywhere.'

'Before I returned to Gallifrey,' said Romana. 'Well, we must do something about this situation, Spandrell. Not only is chaos now loose in the cosmos, with all the coincidences and complexities that implies, but if the device malfunctions completely, then those people are doomed. If we switch it off, they're also doomed. And so are we, because that brown dust looks like a contact poison.'

Spandrell took off his cap of office and scratched his head. 'That is an unstable time field,' he grumped. 'A Time Lord couldn't navigate that safely.

May I suggest a strategic withdrawal?' He looked certain that this suggestion would fall on stony ground, and indeed it did.

Romana was looking at the problem, her hands on her hips. She clicked her fingers as an idea came to her. 'Spandrell! What if we added a time baffle from the TARDIS, and reversed the path of the chronons around the circuitry?'

Spandrell blinked. 'I am a simple policeman, Lady President. . . '

‘Wait there, Castellan.’ Romana ran back to her TARDIS, and returned clutching a circuit. She pulled out her sonic screwdriver, and swiftly connected it to the sphere.

‘Ah, Madam President, the reptilian creatures. . . I believe they are known as Chelonians. What happens when. . . ?’

‘Good point.’ Romana stopped, a moment before she was due to activate the device. ‘Hold this. When you see me dematerialize the TARDIS, switch on.’Spandrell lowered himself into the crevice as his President made her way back to the time capsule. As the familiar sounds of dematerialization echoed across the valley, he pressed the button.

The intensity of the blue light increased. For a moment, nothing happened, then, slowly, the pink disintegrator blast retreated back into the cannon, and the brown dust settled back into its capsules.

Spandrell deactivated the sphere.

The human beings and the Chelonians stared at each other.

First Pilot Jinkwa reached his left foot towards the button that would release the deadly zarathion poison, feeling a curious sense of *déjà vu*. His Chelonian 3

troops directed their cannons once more towards the ragged Parasites before them. Surely, he was only moments away from victory, made all the more glorious by his own impending death.

But then something entirely unexpected happened.

A brick wall appeared between his forces and the ragged Parasites. Jinkwa blinked, slowly and with difficulty.

On the other side of the wall, a door opened. Romana waved to the humans, beckoning them inside. ‘Come on!’ she cried. ‘All aboard the *Skylark*!’

A moment later, the humans rescued, the TARDIS vanished again.

Spandrell squeezed himself further into the crevice, hoping that the naviga-tion computers on Romana’s TARDIS were functioning correctly. A moment later, his faith was justified as the craft, once more a beach hut, appeared beside him. He hopped in just as a salvo of angry pink blasts destroyed the crevice behind him.

The Chelonians looked about themselves angrily as the craft vanished once more. The Parasites were gone.

Jinkwa opened his mouth to say something. It should have been apt, stylish and full of the romance of unfulfilled battle, but it was going to be short, blunt and rude. He didn't get to say it. He choked, rolled his eyes, and collapsed, his wounds finally overcoming him. The other Chelonians gathered around him as his vision faded, and, in the absence of any other meaningful activity, began to sing an ancient Chelonian battle hymn, entitled 'We Have to Kill the Parasites, Because We're So Much Better Than They Are'.

Vanessa and the other bewildered 'eight twelves' staggered out of Romana's TARDIS onto the platform of Rickmansworth Station, one bright morning in 1993. 'But what happened to us?' the young woman was asking the Time Lady. 'What was all that *about*?'

'Sorry.' Romana smiled sweetly. 'You'll just have to treat it as one of those things, I'm afraid.' And with that she stepped back into the TARDIS. A moment later, it disappeared.

The humans looked about themselves, relieved, as the craft vanished once more. The other commuters were staring at them, astonished at the remains of business suits they wore and the battered briefcases they carried.

A voice blared out over the loudspeaker. 'The train arriving at platform one is the nine-twelve for London Marylebone, stopping at Harrow On The Hill only.'

4

Vanessa turned to her companions and took a deep breath. 'Well,' she began, 'it was lovely getting to know you. . . '

Romana perched on the edge of her desk, pleased with a job well done. 'I think that went rather well, Spandrell. Just the sort of small intervention we should encourage.'

'Indeed.' Spandrell's tone carefully suggested neither approval nor disagree-ment.

'The next thing on my list is an inspection of the vaults. All those objects from Gallifreyan history that may or may not be useful. We go through them, we make sure that not too many of them have been stolen, we throw out the rubbish.'

‘As you wish, Madam President.’ The Castellan began pressing buttons again.

Romana was touring the balconies of the Citadel, shaking hands in the elegant food dispensaries with those who had supported her, when Spandrell found her with the news.

He took her aside. ‘Only one important thing is missing,’ he whispered to her. ‘But it is a very important thing.’

Romana glanced over her shoulder at the jolly gang of Patraxes who were toasting her success yet again. ‘Show me.’

The catacombs echoed with the drip of condensation. A guard opened the door to the vaults, and closed it again behind Romana and Spandrell, saluting as he did so.

A series of bizarre objects ran along shelves against the rock walls, many of their functions completely obscure. These were the potentially powerful artefacts from Gallifreyan history that nobody had quite decided what to do with. A lot of them, whether truthfully or not, bore the tag, ‘of Rassilon’.

Security here was meant to be tight, but seldom was.

The gap in the rows, when they came to it, was obvious. A metre-long emptiness between objects, with a pale patch on the ledge where it had sat.

‘What was it?’ Romana asked.

‘The Loom of Rassilon’s Mouse.’

Romana’s expression remained serious. ‘Rassilon’s what?’

‘His mouse. According to the catalogue it’s a –’

‘I can guess what it is, Spandrell. The question is, who’s got it? When was the vault last checked?’

Spandrell peered myopically at his pad. ‘On. . . by the Rivers of Rassilon. . . ’

He looked up at Romana. ‘The night before the last Feast of Omega.’

Romana spun on her heel and grabbed the pad. ‘So the Fortean Flicker was a diversion. Somebody made sure that that sphere would malfunction. The Flicker could have switched off our security for a moment. Spandrell, who could possibly have done this?’

The aged Castellan shook his head slowly. ‘Any renegade you care to name.’

Romana slapped the pad into her hand in frustration. ‘What can we do?’

‘Wait.’ Spandrell sighed. ‘That is, Madam President, as you’ll find, your most traditional duty.’

‘Yes. . . ’ Romana folded her arms. ‘I only hope that, wherever it surfaces, the Othering thing doesn’t cause too much trouble.’

6

Pre-Titles Sequence

The small creature with the furry little face looked briefly to the left of the field of view she was framed in, and nodded to her camera operator. ‘We go for this on four, yeah? OK. One, two, three –’

She sneezed then, a noise like a tiny gunshot. The cameraman chittered something uncomplimentary as she produced a spotted handkerchief and blew her muzzle. ‘Sorry, Kitai, it’s the air in this place, it’s full of pollen.

OK. Ready? Right. One, two, three. . . four.’

The red light flicked on atop the camera, and Keri the Pakhar smiled to her audience. ‘Hi. Today we’re here in the sleepy little village of Cheldon Bonniface, on Earth. Not the Earth as we know it today, but the historical era of twenty ten.’

The camera roamed briefly around the scene, a misty early-evening view of the village green, a few cottages with satellite dishes and a mossy war memorial. ‘How did I get here? Well, I guess that’s classified, yeah? But if these recordings ever make it back to the network, I hope they’ll be useful to historians and archaeologists as well as my usual viewers. We’ve been invited to this place for a special occasion, what Earth people call a wedding, where two humans pair-bond. Your reporter’s been asked to be a bridesmaid, though she isn’t sure just what that means yet. Still, they say there’s

carrots in it.' Keri produced one of the vegetables and gave it a jaunty, heavily rehearsed bite.

'Bloody delicious, and the only place you'll find them is here. Don't I get all the tough jobs? Anyhow, I see the happy couple over by the duckpond. Let's see if they're nervous. Come on, Kitai.'

The camera followed Keri as she skipped across to the duckpond, where a small man in a panama hat and a paisley scarf was desperately trying to get between two other figures, who were pointing and yelling at each other with some energy. One was a woman in her mid-thirties, with short-cut black hair and a colourful shirt. The other was a brown-haired man, with hard eyes, heavy stubble and the sort of big-sleeved shirt and breeches that would suit a buccaneer.

All three figures stopped what they were doing as Keri approached. The little man turned and grinned comically at the camera, while the two who were fighting lowered their fists and turned in different directions, as if carefully examining the fields and the ducks.

7

'Erm, Keri, this is a bad time. . . ' the little man began. 'Find me later. I love doing interviews. I haven't been on television in a long time.'

'Well, just a second, Doctor, what's the problem here? Bernice and Jason are supposed to be getting married. Why are they fighting?'

'Because,' Bernice told the camera, flashing a too-bright grin, 'my would-be husband, despite his experience of time travel, is still marooned in the *sixteenth century*. He wants a mere chattel, someone to make toast for him.

This is because his *brain* is in his –'

'My function in all this,' the Doctor interrupted, stepping between Benny and the camera, 'is to give her away.'

'Give her away?' Jason bellowed, causing the cameraman to swing the camera back to him. 'You'd have to pay me to *take* her! I just repeated the words on the card –'

'Including the word "obey",' said Benny, stepping forward to pull the view back to her. 'If the vows had included "exterminate" it wouldn't have given him a moment's pause.'

‘It’s a printing error!’ Jason cried, throwing his hands in the air. ‘ *I’ll obey you* if you like – that’s the way things generally seem to work out, after all.

Let’s have them print up new cards for the rehearsal and put the Doctor to even *more* expense, shall we?’

‘Don’t you dare bring the Doctor into this. You only just met him.’ The two lovers had turned away from the camera again, intent on each other.

As the Doctor smiled quickly at Keri and hopped back into the middle of the fray, a short, lithe black woman in shorts stalked by. She stopped, and looked pityingly at Bernice and Jason.

Keri, desperate for something she could use, thrust her microphone towards her. ‘Roz, any thoughts concerning marriage?’

‘Yes,’ the Adjudicator said, blank-faced. ‘Don’t.’

And she went on her way.

Keri waved at Kitai frantically, and he pulled the camera around to form a nice backing shot of Keri against a hedgerow. ‘So,’ Keri began again, ‘we’re all looking forward to the big event. Particularly the buffet. Maybe we’ll go and see how these carrot things are made, I don’t know. The people angle is letting us down. I – hey, stop!’

A handsome, blond young man had ambled up behind Keri, and was waving at the camera. The Pakhar turned and looked up at him angrily. ‘Chris, get out of the crukking shot, I’m trying to do my job here.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ Chris Cwej frowned, and then, his face igniting in a sudden rebellious grin, he grabbed the fur on Keri’s cheeks and tousled it quickly with his fingers. ‘Biddly biddly biddly!’ Chuckling to himself, he lumbered off again.

8

Keri turned back to her cameraman, her facial hair sticking out like the fibres of a fluffed-up woollen jumper. ‘Cut. I’m going back to the guest-house to lick this down.’ The camera followed her as she stamped across the village green. She turned back on the way and pointed. ‘And if this ever makes it to the Christmas Party Reel, Kitai, you’re fired.’

# The Unformed Heart

The spring of 2010 was the first real one that the northern hemisphere had experienced in many years. England especially had grown used to a tiny hint of growth at the end of February, which would be crushed with heavy frost and pelting hail in March and April, before a stunted, vestigial season crept out once more in the middle of May.

This spring, then, was like a long, relieved breath. A lot of people, not all of them in the south, had started to talk seriously about extinction, about humanity actually coming to an end. A touch of sunlight on an April morning was the first sign that things were getting better.

The village of Cheldon Bonniface hadn't changed much in the last twenty years. The average income of the villagers had gone up a little: those who could do so had been leaving the cities. The farming community, however, was enjoying a bit of a renaissance. As heroes of the Reconstruction, with their incredibly fast and far-reaching plan to put the planet back on its feet again, they had never enjoyed a higher public profile. Great farming families were establishing themselves. The new crops, mostly meat-substitute plants, were again filling what had been dark and empty fields.

The River Bure reflected the dark blue of the sky as it flowed under the little bridge at the edge of the village. It wasn't dawn yet, but already it was quite warm. The air was alive around the bridge, filled with a cloud of rising insects, through which small birds flickered, feeding.

There were few human sounds from the village at this time in the morning: the distant sound of tractors, a milkfloat buzzing from house to house, the squeak of the postman's bicycle as he puffed his way over the bridge. Those noises were obscured by the clatter of birds in the trees, their dawn chorus, and the distant cries of animals. But another sound drifted through the buildings, past the cottages with electric cars outside, around the blunt shape of the war memorial: a cascade of bells, as if randomly rung. A gentle sound, not at all insistent. It was said that the wind sent the bell ropes twisting, and that caused the noise, and only a few inhabitants of the village knew that that was wrong. They knew that the bells were the sound of something sacred, dreaming.

The bells woke Bernice. She smiled at the low light that was

illuminating the little back bedroom. Then she glanced at the side of Jason's face. His stubbly 11

cheek was pressed up against her chin. His mouth was open, and he was snoring gently.

'Foop,' she said.

She'd never learnt how to sleep with someone else, and, of course, he'd never had much chance to get the knack. On their first night sharing this bed, he'd held onto her as if she was a soft toy, and fallen asleep with her in a vicelike grip. Whenever she'd tried to slip out of it, he'd changed position, and this slow form of sumo had slithered them both, over the period of half an hour, right across the bed to the point where Benny's head was hanging over the edge.

She'd made some serious decisions about romance at that point, not all of them caused by the rush of blood to the brain. She'd woken Jason by tapping on his head, the only bit of him that she could move a hand to reach. 'Hoi.

Hello?' she'd called. 'This has got to stop.' She'd made it clear that she'd like to get to sleep as well, that being held on to like – and she was quite pleased with his metaphor – a parachute for his dreams, was not useful. And, when it was cold, as it was that night, she wanted to wear her nightshirt as well.

All these demands had been met, and things had got rather better lately.

Jason still tended to snuggle up after dropping off, and his chin still worked away at Benny's skin like sandpaper, but at least Bernice had time to get to sleep before the struggle began.

This morning was their fifteenth in this lovely bed, a big, warmish, duvet-covered thing that took up most of Peter and Emily Hutchings's back bedroom.

As with most spare bedrooms, there wasn't much in the way of ornamentation, but, with twin suitcases thrown into a corner, it had started to feel like a first home.

They could have stayed in the TARDIS, of course, but the Reverend had said that they had to live in the village itself for some time prior to the wedding, and the Doctor had surprised everybody by shooing them out of the TARDIS, telling them that the interior of his spacetime

craft wasn't technically part of Cheldon Bonniface, and that he wouldn't dream of trying to fool a Trelaw.

Or, as Jason had put it: 'We fought Trelaw, and Trelaw won.'

That was the other irritating thing about Jason, his joy in deliberately awful jokes. He would come out with one with a little sigh and a straight face, or sometimes a flick of the eyebrows. To Benny, who had spent a lifetime perfecting her timing, this was anathema.

And there were the rows, of course. They fought like two cats that had got their tails tangled. Some tiny thing would escalate into a series of little snappings, and that could go on, to everybody else's annoyance, for most of the day. Then they'd both have established their positions, illogical, inconsistent and incoherent as they might be, and would persist at them, firing salvoes 12

back and forth. Finally, all barriers would dissolve and they'd start openly bellowing at each other. From that point, there were several options: **Sulking.** They'd both crash off to different rooms and each would refuse to talk to the other, at least until the Doctor, who seemed to have adopted the role of referee, arrived with plates of scones.

**Sobbing.** Benny had twice dissolved into tears: once, when Jason had said something particularly awful and true about her only wanting to mother him; and once when she'd got terribly frustrated at this continual anger, and how stupid the argument she was putting forward was. He'd become very guilty each time, and immediately dropped all his rage, and held her. He was probably getting an immunity to sobs by now, though. It might not work again.

**Violence.** Benny had once slapped Jason full in the face, and then run away, distraught at what she'd done and convinced that she'd just ended their relationship. He'd come after her carefully, very sober, just as afraid.

**Slow climb-downs and admissions of love.** Often, they both just shook their heads and realized they were being stupid at the same time. This sub-heading included bursting into spontaneous laughter at how pretentious they were being, something that annoyed their friends more than anything else, because it gave them the impression that the rows were some sort of complex joke designed to make them feel uncomfortable.

**Shagging like rabbits.** This had happened once. Afterwards, Benny

had complained that it was really just Jason being all male and subduing her with his masculinity. But, as he said, she hadn't mentioned that during. She'd been too busy scratching his lower portions off, so they'd both worked off some aggression.

Rows, no good at sleeping, bad way with jokes. Snoring and stubble as well.

Never before had she felt even remotely attracted to a bloke with such a nasty chin. Looking at him now, she wondered why she loved him. It was, after all, a great surprise to find oneself so attached and vulnerable. She remembered what she'd said when she'd introduced Jason to the man who had volunteered to give her away: 'Doctor, this is my fiancé. Please don't kill him.'

This train of thought led her back into dreams and half-sleep for an hour or two. When she fully woke again, serious sunlight was forming a brilliant, dust-illuminating square across the corner of the room. She extracted herself from Jason's grasp, lifted the covers and got out of bed. She looked back at his naked form for a second, his arm thrown back over his head, his mouth wide open. Serious doubts welled up from inside her, as they often did. But she supposed that, should the wedding suddenly be called off, she'd only want to start planning it again. For the first time in many years, Bernice didn't know what she was going to feel, from one moment to the next. It wasn't a mood 13

that she really liked, but she supposed that it might be what people referred to as love. 'You have turned me into such a girly,' she told the sleeping man, grimly. 'I'll be shaving my armpits next.'

When Benny got to the landing, Ishtar Hutchings was leaning on the wall outside the bathroom, her red dressing gown making her look like a prize fighter. Her long auburn hair didn't even look messy, as Benny's did in the morning. More. . . tousled. God, she was young. Twenty, to be exact, with no weight under her chin, and a navel she was alarmingly proud to show off in public. Her biological alarm clock wasn't even wound up yet, never mind about to go off.

Benny unconsciously found herself pulling her nightshirt down over her thighs as she approached.

Ish glanced at her with a perfect smile. 'It's Emily. Ever since she started working from home, she takes ages in the bathroom.'

'Oh bloody hell!' a voice called from behind the door. 'There's a queue now, is there? Can't you all make some toast or something?'

Benny leant her head against the door. ‘No problem. I was just going to have a wash.’

Ish rubbed a grain of sleep from her gorgeous eyes as Benny straightened up. ‘How are you and Jason doing? Is it OK if I ask that? Only I heard you had a row after the wedding rehearsal.’

‘Don’t worry. No, we’re fine, we just sulked a lot and the Doctor got us talking again. Jason used the old phrasing of the vows, you know, the “obey”

bit?’

‘Is that still in the King Charles version?’

‘No, and with Jason being off the planet for so long, I thought that was a bit suspect, myself.’

‘I dunno why you’re having a church wedding. Nobody does any more.

Neither of you are C of E, are you?’

Benny grinned broadly, and shook her head at the insanity of it all. ‘Absolutely not. Human Orthodox, in my case, so severely lapsed that I can’t remember the last time I entered a church that wasn’t a ruin. This is all the Doctor’s doing. He just heard that we wanted to get married, and said that he knew just the place. It’s one of those human things that he doesn’t do very well, I think. Anyway, I love the village and Saul’s very sweet, so we might as well go along with it. If we survive each other that long.’

‘You’ve got doubts, then?’

Benny took a deep breath. ‘If I run away from the altar, clutching my bouquet and screaming that it’s all been a terrible mistake, don’t be surprised.

Oh, it’s just nerves. Enough about me, anyway. How are you and –’



‘Shh!’ Ish quickly moved Benny away from the door. She pointed at it, frantically shook her head and silently screamed into her hands, then made a cutting motion across her throat.

‘How are your studies going?’ Benny finished her sentence quickly,

raising an eyebrow. ‘I gather Chris is teaching you. . . all sorts of things.’

Ish wrinkled her beautiful nose at Benny in a look of mock evil. The door behind her opened and Emily Hutchings wandered out, wafting the steam from her curtailed bath away with a copy of *Freelance Writer* magazine. She glanced between her daughter and her lodger. ‘I’ll be glad when you’re *both* married,’ she concluded.

As Emily stamped off down the stairs, Benny and Ishtar looked at each other and shook their heads in unison.

Keri reached out and plucked the mirror from one corner of the nest she’d made in her room in Mrs Higgins’s guesthouse. She inspected her whiskers in it, and decided that they were as flat as they could be.

The nest was mainly made of Spraybed, a Pakhar product that allowed you to create in seconds a nest that lasted for several days. Added to that was a small quantity of straw, and four black feathers of a certain length. They indicated to any Pakhar visitors that Keri was a female video journalist with two unattached sisters back at home, who had a moderate income. A couple of notches out of one feather were for Kitai’s benefit, a mild insult which roughly translated as: ‘Not if we were the last two Pakhars in the universe, my great friend and dear work colleague.’

Satisfied with her appearance, Keri hopped out of her nest and selected a robe from the wardrobe. She was nearly at the door when she remembered the holo-projector. This device allowed her to pass amongst the humans of Cheldon Bonniface, circa 2010, unremarked. It created a picture of a female human in their eyes and minds: in Keri’s case, an image of a rather battleworn woman, obviously a journalist. When all the other aliens that Bernice had invited arrived, there would be a lot of these devices in operation. Keri was in the village early because of her function at the wedding. Being a bridesmaid was something of which she was very proud. The preparations also gave her and Kitai the opportunity to get some footage of the place. Whether the Doctor would let them use it once he took them back to their own time was another matter.

As her image in the mirror changed, Keri checked the door holo-projector also. This allowed Mrs Higgins to make the bed in a completely virtual guest-room, one that was even convincing enough to vary its virtual clutter day by day. This, of course, necessitated bombarding the landlady’s brainstem with a beam of intelligent

underlying quantum mind structure, moment by moment. Mrs Higgins might dream about there being a nest in one of her guest-rooms, but she'd never actually sense it. The Doctor had said that the technology concerned was a variation on something that the Tzun had put together. This had activated Keri's journalistic instincts, because to her people, the Tzun, or Maleans, were legendary demons. But the Doctor had just made that weird burble of his that might have been words, and waved the question aside.

Keri thought that it would probably have been easier just to tell Mrs Higgins that she had an alien staying. But, for some reason, the Doctor was dead against that.

She made sure the device was operating, and closed the door behind her.

The binoculars swept across the sky. It was blue again now, returning from the grey blankness that it had started to adopt a few years ago. That reviving colour, and the return of the old weather, the ancient cycle of spring, summer, autumn, winter, had certainly brought people's spirits up. The human race, at least in this backwater of Britain, had started to look up again.

The view settled on a small bird, a blue tit, sitting on the end of a branch. It was contemplating the ploughed field, searching for worms. Suddenly, there was an impact, a clash of wings, and the bird was gone, swept off in the beak of a kestrel. The binoculars struggled to follow the bird of prey for a moment, and caught a fleeting glimpse of it flashing away.

The owner of the binoculars lowered them, and stared after the raptor as it disappeared behind the line of the forest. He was a tall, elegant-looking man, apparently in his early forties. He had a suave, laugh-lined face and a neatly trimmed beard. But his eyes were a hard, steely blue. He was dressed entirely in black.

'The transformation of hunter into prey,' he murmured. 'How apt.'

The thought seemed to amuse him, and he went on his way, chuckling to himself.

The morning sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows of St Christopher's church, illuminating the aisles in soft colours. Dust motes drifted and sparkled in that light, and settled on the brim of a

fedora, hanging jauntily from the end of a pew.

Along the bench lay a man, or rather not exactly a man. He was small, and had what was nearly a haircut, a just-out-of-control bush of dark-brown hair. He was dressed in a nearly-fashion, too. Nearly the garb of an Edwardian at a garden party, but with a paisley scarf, and question marks on the collars of an open-necked shirt. He was deep in an old book, sucking his bot-16

tom lip distractedly as he read, his left hand fluttering between being placed thoughtfully on his chin and tapping some word on the page.

The small creatures of the church, the mice and the insects, had noticed him, as small creatures always did. Initially, they'd hidden, fearing that he was a storm. But then, when no storm happened, they'd re-emerged, and regarded him from a distance. There was something of the regained climate about him, they'd decided with their small minds. He smelt of new growth as well as destruction, of the air that grew sweeter every day. It was the same everywhere he went, this traveller in time and space known as the Doctor. He could never have a picnic but for curious bees.

'What are you reading, Doctor?' a choral voice echoed through the building.

The Doctor closed the book and glanced up at the rafters. 'Neville Cardus, Saul. His book on cricket. I'm trying to learn how to play it.'

Saul was the being that inhabited the bricks and mortar of the church, as a person inhabited their body, as the Doctor had once put it. He and the Time Lord were old friends. Indeed, the Doctor was one of the few regular visitors to Cheldon Bonniface who knew of Saul's existence: the vast majority of the locals were unaware of the presence that hung about the building. 'Am I mistaken, or did you not play the game once?' Saul chorused. 'The younger you, with blond hair. I remember him talking endlessly about it.'

'Ah, yes. . . him. Not me. Not me now.' The Doctor waved aside the question with an embarrassed grin. 'No, you see, Benny has said that I can't play chess while we're here. She thinks I've always got a plan, and that Jason's probably part of it, and that if I go near a chessboard I'll start plotting again.'

'And are you?'

'No. Well, only to keep the wedding on course. Which is difficult.'

‘I did wonder why you were spending so much time here, instead of with your companions. I had anticipated alien invaders.’

The Doctor folded up his book and legs in one movement, to sit on the pew cross-legged. ‘You should. But friendly ones. Wedding guests. I’m not going to fetch them for a while. As to why I’m here. . . People things. . . human things, marriages. Not my field. I can plan the details, but I can’t. . . ’ He stopped, opened the book again, and reread a line, as if part of his mind had kept on considering it, then flipped it closed. ‘I just can’t.’

The conversation would have continued, but the door to the church opened, and a young black man entered. He looked at the Doctor in puzzlement. ‘Hi, Doctor. How on earth did you get in here?’

Saul made a sound, his equivalent of a polite cough, and the young man gently slapped his head in mock surprise. ‘Of course. Sorry, Saul. My last church didn’t have one of you about. It takes a bit of getting used to, you know?’



‘And I find it hard to get used to having a verger, James,’ Saul replied. ‘Ernest used to get by without one, for fear that a non-Trelaw would be scared of me.’

‘Oh yeah?’ The verger cheekily polished the golden-eagle lectern with the corner of his coat. ‘You’re not so hard, mate. Not a lot of weight on you, is there?’

‘Ah, but he can come in useful in a fight,’ the Doctor said. He had stood up, and wandered up to the eagle, book in hand.

‘So I hear.’ James shook his head at the Doctor. ‘Saul’s told me about all that moon stuff, and you being an alien and all that. Normally, it’d be a bit much to swallow but. . . ’ He glanced up at the rafters. ‘Look who’s doing the telling.

Now, ’scuse me, I’ve got to get changed. Don’t peep at me in the vestry, Saul.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it, James,’ the church rumbled.

‘Jim!’ the verger called as he vanished through a side door.

‘You know, Doctor, that I am largely telepathic, that I can read

people's thoughts,' said Saul. 'Well, that young man is one of a small but growing number of people who I cannot read at all.'

'Ah, you're getting old.'

'I am changing. Does that displease you?'

The Doctor visibly pulled himself together, clicking his heels together. 'Not at all. I'm just feeling at a loose end. Maybe I should slope off and save a planet.'

'I suspect we need you here.' Saul laughed.

'Oh, you're not going?' A rotund, harassed-looking woman in a dog-collar bustled through the door. 'Don't leave me at the mercy of that blasted couple. Sorry, but somebody really should sit them down and ask them if they wouldn't prefer to live in sin for a bit, just try it out, see what it's like to co-habit with another person.' She laid a hand on the Doctor's shoulder, seriously.

'Save us the cost of a divorce, eh?'

The Doctor smiled and gently put his hand on hers. 'They'll be fine, Annie.'

The Reverend Annie Trelaw slapped the hand away gently, and headed for the vestry, making a spire of her palms. 'The hell they will. Sorry, Lord, it's just the way I feel this morning.'

The Doctor leant on the eagle lectern. 'Am I the only one who thinks that Benny and Jason make a good couple?'

Saul considered for a moment, then decided. 'Yes.'

Emily Hutchings stared at the sentence she'd just written on her word-processor screen. 'It was a wild, unshaven place?' she wailed. 'Even at midnight, I imagined an island with stubble?' Emily was a worried-looking woman in her early forties, her hair pinned up without a great deal of care, so 18

strands of it were always falling over her face. She had the look of somebody who'd found true harassment only in later life.

There was a knock at the door of her study. 'Go away!' Emily shouted. 'No, no, all right, come on in, but only if you bring toast!'

Benny opened the door and tiptoed in. She was dressed now, in a blue

sundress. And, indeed, she carried a plate of toast. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Very well.’ Emily reached up and took a slice. ‘I’ve decided that what I wrote last night was absolute pants, so that’s a breakthrough.’

Bernice sat down on the other side of Emily’s desk. ‘I think it’s very brave of you, to branch out on your own like this.’

Emily munched on her toast. ‘Well, five years ago I thought: Peter’s making enough for both of us with his maths now, so I can chuck the teaching in. He wasn’t too keen at first, but he’s very happy now that I’m making as much as he does. It was either that or exploit my feeble psychic powers.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘Which seem to have vanished with age. I didn’t even pick the Grand National winner last year.’

‘I must read one of your books.’ Bernice’s gaze moved to the long rack of purple-jacketed paperbacks that ran along the mantelpiece.

Emily shook her head. ‘No, you mustn’t. Wait until I’ve written a real book.

Not those things. They pay the bills, but they’re not what I want to write all my life.’

‘So they’re just hackwork then?’ Bernice had plucked a term from her lit-erary studies out of thin air, with no idea of what import it had. Her own published works were all non-fiction, after all.

Emily pushed her glasses an inch back up her nose. ‘Hackwork? Oh. Well, no, I wouldn’t say that. These are the best I could do, I’ve never just. . . what the hell do you mean, “hackwork”?’

Bernice sighed. ‘Sorry. It’s just hard to keep track of what you think about your books. You keep on about doing something more meaningful, but you don’t like anybody saying that what you’re doing now is less important. I won’t mention it in future.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Emily had returned to her typing. ‘Just regard me as eccentric and go from there. When I’ve written *The Unformed Heart*, then you won’t have to worry. All these are just formula romances, but that one. . . that’s going to be literature. Out of genre, even. You can read that one.’

‘Have you plotted it, then?’ Bernice was glad to get off the uncertain ground of whether or not Emily’s lavender-covered output was

literature or not. ‘What’s it going to be about?’

‘Ah. . . ’ Emily smiled again, much to Bernice’s relief. ‘That would be telling.

Got a vague plot, but no characters yet. Did you have a reason to come in 19

here and hang about, by the way? Sorry to be so blunt, but if I don’t get a thousand words out of the way before elevenses, I panic.’

Bernice took a deep breath and made herself smile lightly. ‘No problem.

No, I just wanted to say sorry about crowding you out of the bathroom this morning. If it’s all getting a bit much, Jason and I could move into the guesthouse where Keri is.’

‘Oh no, we wouldn’t dream of it.’ Emily shook her head seriously. ‘Peter and I owe the Doctor our lives and our child. A bit of board and lodging is absolutely nothing, and you’re not to take my being horrible as a sign that you should quit.’ She tapped a jar of pills on the desk. ‘If I get a bit tetchy it’s just the hormones. These days, they say you can just switch everything off in a couple of months, so I jumped at that. Quick as you can, I said. But my experience of it is that one goes utterly mad in the process. Do they get it right by your time?’

‘Oh yes,’ Benny said. ‘Not that I’m ready for that for a few years.’

‘Of course not, didn’t mean to suggest that. You’ve got babies to look forward to.’

Benny rolled her hand from side to side. ‘Umm. Don’t ask about that. I don’t fancy giving birth. There are times when I’m not even sure if I want to get married.’

‘You’re not sure if you want to get married?’ Emily took her glasses off and blinked at Benny in amazement. ‘Why, then, are you only a few days away from actually doing it?’

Bernice bit her lip. It had only been a half-formed thought. There were days when she did, now, and days when she didn’t. ‘Sorry. Nerves. Of course I want to get married. Why shouldn’t I?’

Jason wandered into the room, in a towelling robe, stretching and yawning.

‘Morning, ladies,’ he rumbled. ‘Ah, breakfast!’ He offhandedly took a piece of toast, pecked Benny on the cheek and left.

Emily slipped her glasses back on to her nose. ‘I won’t say it if you don’t.’

‘Don’t. He’s lovely.’

‘I like him a lot. So does Peter. But do you really want to wake up with him, and only him, every day for the rest of your life? That’s what this means, you know.’

Benny got up and wandered to the window. She opened it, and let the air and the noises of a spring morning into the study. ‘I really don’t know. I’m certain, most of the time. And then suddenly I’m not. Happens all the time.

I wonder if I’ve had enough boyfriends to make a choice.’ She turned back to Emily. ‘And I’m the first human Jason’s seen in years. It’s like chickens hatching out and thinking the first thing they see is their mum. It could have been Roz. . . it could have been Chris, for God’s sake!’

20

‘But you love him?’

‘Yes. . . yes, I don’t really doubt that. But does that do anybody any good?’

‘Well, you make your choice carefully. Don’t worry if you have to leave him at the altar – we’ll all support you.’ Emily tapped the screen of her word-processor. ‘You know, since I became an author of mass-produced, formulaic romantic fiction –’

‘Emily –’

‘Since I’ve started doing this, I’ve gained a whole new perspective on marriage. In these books, it’s always the happy ending, the closure at the end of the text. Everything is settled, every doubt and difficulty is over, our hero and heroine are married. They don’t have to be in the book any more. I have a feeling that a lot of people think that it’s like that in real life, that marriage will be the solution to all their problems. It’s an end to change, the happy version of suicide.’

Benny smiled sadly and turned from the window. ‘Well, at this exact

moment, I'm feeling rather nervous about jumping.'

'So don't.'

Benny took another piece of toast and headed off after Jason. 'I'll let you know.'

Keri was hurrying along the main street of the little village, nodding and smiling her holographic smile at the various locals who had obviously started to think that she was somebody famous. She was due to meet Kitai by the war memorial at ten to get some establishing shots. His chosen holographic form was ridiculously handsome and chiselled, so the humans told her, and it seemed to be true, because he attracted attention everywhere he went. Both their disguises, therefore, failed spectacularly in the aim of letting them blend in quietly.

Which was probably a joke on Kitai's part. He'd set the devices, and it was just like him to fiddle with them.

Keri felt the familiar irritation building up in her snout, and tried to hold it back. She stretched her tongue out to touch her nose, which normally stopped a sneeze, but then wondered what that would do to her holographic image, and stopped. There was definitely something in the air that –

*Choo!*

She was standing in a gigantic silver palace, crystalline spires of entwined glass and ice, stretching in spirals miles above her head. And all around her, robed Pakhars stood, their fuzzy heads bowed in supplication as they threw fireworks at her feet, chanting ancient and terrifying hymns of worship and deification. 'Keri. . . Keri. . . ' they cried. 'We are your people, lead us!'

Keri opened her mouth to say something.

21

*Choo!*

She was back in Cheldon Bonniface. Standing stock-still in the middle of the street.

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and blew her snout thoughtfully.

Then she shook her head and moved on. ‘Weird. . . yeah?’

The Doctor, his book still under his arm, strode up to the TARDIS, which stood proudly on the village green. A little sign beside it said: ‘Property of the Victoria and Albert Museum, kindly loaned for display.’ Bernice’s idea.

He’d been thinking, as he walked through the village, of how peaceful and comfortable this place was. The relaxation of the visit had made him realize that part of him was always alert for danger, jumping at shadows. And there were none here. If Allen Road was his fortress and safe house, this was his. . .

well, his little English village. A place where one could stay, in safety. After all that Bernice had gone through on his behalf, particularly in the Channel Islands. . .

. . . And how he’d raged about that, alone at night, how he’d wanted to find them across time and space, and show them how small their meagre idea of horror was. . .

He made an effort to stop himself, to think of happy things. He mustn’t be the saddest person at the wedding. Look what had happened last time. All that business with the albatross.

He was disturbed from his reverie by a call from across the green. Ishtar Hutchings was jogging across the grass towards him, a mass of bright colours, showing off her fashionably pale torso. He managed a smile for her. ‘Ishtar.

Healthy as always.’

‘Morning, Doctor. Not good today. Three times around the village and I’m crukked.’

‘Language.’ He fumbled in his pocket for his keys, swiftly recapturing a viro-chipkey that came alive in the sunlight and attempted to escape.

Ish stared at him, smoothing her hair away from her face. ‘It only means

“tired”; it’s out of that anime show, *Bones and Kay*.’

The Doctor paused as he opened the door of the TARDIS, a muddled smile and frown crossing his face. ‘Oh yes. . . That doesn’t last. By

2025 it's very rude.'

'Then I should use it while the sun shines. Can I come in and see Wolsey?'

'Yes. Of course.' The Doctor waved her to follow him, wondering why he'd started to feel almost irritated by Ishtar's presence. Normally, he delighted in the company of the young woman who had so many questions for him. 'I'm not going to be very long. Just checking some controls.'



Ishtar nodded happily. 'Fine. I just love being in the TARDIS.' She closed the door after her.

The Doctor went straight to the console, and checked a few readings. 'No,' he murmured. 'Everything's fine.'

Ishtar was turning slowly on the spot, staring up at the ceiling and stretching. 'Wow!' she breathed. 'I will never get over that! You can really breathe in here, you know? Like, you're not confined to one tiny planet any more. It's so fab.'

The word made the Doctor smile secretly to himself. 'It's not so bad, being on one planet. You've got roots. Your parents, your friends. . . ' He frowned.

'My current companion.'

'Oh, hey, that's not serious.' Ish started to stretch, fingertip to toe, alternat-ing legs. 'Chris is just a really good night out. He doesn't get all heavy, he's funny. . . ' She paused, her head halfway to the ground. 'You won't tell Emily and Peter, will you?'

The Doctor turned, and leant on the console. 'Why don't you call them Mum and Dad?'

'Because they're not. I love them, but I've never been able to call them that.'

'You were just a baby when I left you with them. How could you know –'

'Don't ask me. I just want to know if you're going to tell them about me and Chris or not. Come on, you can't be mysterious with me; we're

mates.'

'Of course I won't tell them.' The Doctor left the console and went to a wicker hamper in the corner of the room. He threw it open and stared at its contents. 'I'm a keeper of secrets. I know who killed the Kennedys, what became of the Pythia, and who put the bomp in the bomp-a-lomp-a-lomp. I don't care who you choose to snog.' He pronounced the last word as if it was a treasure he'd found in a museum. He reached down into the hamper and pulled out a cricket ball, holding it between two fingers like a biological spec-imen. 'Apart from caring for your wellbeing. About heartbreak, and doubt, and separation. . . '

Ishtar laughed. 'If I break his heart, he'll have you to look after him. Oh, hi Wols, how are you?' The TARDIS cat had strolled out of the interior of his vast territory, and trotted over to Ishtar's feet, rubbing the side of his head against her ankles. She bent down to stroke him. 'Why don't you let him out?'

'Oh, there's plenty of fresh air and countryside and mice inside the TARDIS.'

'And you're afraid he'd wander off.' Ishtar said it lightly, without looking up.

'Then you'd have to leave him here.'

The Doctor paused for a moment, looking at the back of Ishtar's head, her hair tumbling down over her sweatband. 'I don't know why I worry about 23

you,' he concluded. He flipped the cricket ball up in the air and gingerly caught it with his other hand. 'How's that?'

A field of Friesian cows, their black-and-white hides daubed with the green streaks of antigen treatment, reacted, lowed urgently to each other, and then stampeded as something arrived to disturb their placid, early-morning grazing.A golden sphere of lightning had appeared in the middle of the pasture, bursts of static from it blasting clods of soil up from the ground. A ghostly shape appeared in the middle of it, faded, then solidified, as if a great effort was being made.

Then the sphere vanished. The object that had been inside it was suddenly there, sitting in the air two feet above the ground.

It was a woman, in full crinoline and corset, her hair immaculately

braided, on the back of a large, futuristic motorcycle. At the rear of the bike was tied a rucksack, and on its side was strapped a still-sparking black box, danger symbols in several languages dotting its surface.

The bike fell to earth, its suspension contorting and rebounding with a creak of protesting hydraulics. ‘Ow,’ said the woman, a hungover fatigue in her voice. She blinked at the sun, reached into a side pouch of the bike, and pulled out a pair of mirrorshades, which she slipped on to her nose.

Dorothée Sorina-McShane gunned the engine of the motorcycle into life, and set off across the field towards Cheldon Bonniface, mud flying up in her wake.

Roz Forrester flexed the metal of the club between her hands. ‘Hmm. Nice weight to it. What do I do with it?’

Chris Cwej indicated the tiny wooden tee that he’d planted in the ground, the white ball sitting atop it. ‘The idea is to knock the ball into that hole beside the flag in the fewest number of strokes, right? This isn’t the full-size game, but a wonderful cut-down version for people who’re in a rush. It’s called pitch and putt. Watch!’

He stepped up to the tee and stuck his tongue out, as he always did when he was concentrating, staring at the ball.

Roz watched him for a moment, wondering at what a strange spectacle the two of them made. They’d been given a lesson in local costume from the Hutchings woman, but she still thought Chris’s floral shorts and bright orange shirt looked out of place. She’d opted for lycra, which was darker, and wristbands where she’d hidden the smallest of her guns. All the history she’d read about this era indicated that this was a violent, chaotic time, Earth suffering its first, traumatic encounters with alien life, and, like the victim 24

of some terrible accident, denying that they’d ever happened. The feeling of paranoia over those encounters had grown, leading almost directly to the conflict that erupted over Mars.

Exactly the right era, in short, to hold a wedding with alien and out-of-era guests. Sometimes she wondered if the Doctor was in his right mind.

Chris swung his club back, and whacked the ball towards the green with a powerful, if rather agricultural, stroke. The white sphere

landed several metres short of the flag, still on the fairway. He turned to Roz and grinned.

'That's how you do it.'

Roz nodded, and stuck her own tee into the ground. She balanced the little ball on top of it, and stood up, calculating the distance to the green as she took her stance.

'I was just wondering. . . ' Chris began, in his Comforting voice.

Roz stopped, feeling herself starting to glare. 'What?'

'If Benny and Jason getting engaged was reminding you about –'

Roz swung the club violently. She missed the ball completely. A divot of soil went flying. She didn't look back at him. 'No.'

'Oh. That's all right then.' She could feel him smiling behind her. She swung the club back, ready for another shot, and then stopped.

This was like firing at a sitting target, wasn't it? Which would mean that, normally, she'd knock this thing way off to the right, and Chris would slap her happily on the back, knowing that any barn door would be comparatively safe in a firefight with Roz. He'd also be certain that she was shaken up about something, which she simply wasn't. She narrowed her eyes. If she treated this green as if it was way off to the left. . .

'Having trouble?' Chris called.

'No.' Roz looked away to the left, and awkwardly swiped at the ball. It flew straight at the green, bounced twice, and trickled to within a few centimetres of the hole.

She slapped Chris on the back as he stared at the green. 'Next time we're in combat,' she said, 'remind me about that.'

Bernice and Jason wandered down the street, hand in hand, eating the ice-creams that they'd bought from the corner shop. Benny felt that this was a little awkward, not having a free hand and everything, but Jason had insisted.

Feeling insecure again, obviously. He was looking around as he had been since they'd got here two weeks ago, shaking his head in amazement.

‘You know,’ he began, ‘I never thought I’d see Earth again, let alone be getting married in a lovely little village. I used to dream of places like this when I was on the streets, never mind when I was offworld.’

25

Benny made herself smile. If she heard the phrase ‘when I was on the streets’ again, she decided, she’d scream very suddenly and loudly. ‘Yes, it was something I kept in mind too. When I was being tortured, falling off dirigibles, on some occasions actually being killed, I kept thinking: goodness, this’ll all be worthwhile when I get married in Norfolk. It kept me going, I can tell you.’

‘Yes.’ He hadn’t heard a word of it. He was just staring at a magpie as it hopped away from the kerb, a look of childlike wonder on his face. Benny mel-lowed instantly, glad that he hadn’t paid attention. They’d both been through a lot. Maybe they did deserve each other.

‘Hey.’ She tugged his hand. ‘Come on, let’s go through the itinerary.’

‘Oh? Why? Don’t you know it?’

‘Yes, of course I do. I just like the sound of it.’

Jason smiled, and swung her hand, making as if trying to remember a difficult piece of verse. ‘Let’s see, then. Your other bridesmaid should be arriving any day now, and then you lot get to go for your final dress fittings. The Doctor starts to pick up the guests, which basically means everybody you’ve ever met, but none of mine, since he can’t find any of my family –’

‘Do you mind?’

‘No, no. Boring. Muddled people. Wouldn’t want them anyway. Mind you, unlike a lot of the guests, they wouldn’t steal the silver from the chapel.’

‘Not like you, then?’

‘Don’t look at the bulge in my morning suit when we leave the church.’

‘Sounds ominous. We’ll only have been apart for one night.’

‘Well, it’s been a long time since I saw a human woman.’

Benny’s face fell. She was silent for a little while as they walked along,

choosing her words carefully. ‘I was thinking about that this morning. . . Jason –’ She would have asked some sober, careful questions then, but the sound of an engine wafted down the quiet little street. Around the corner came an extraordinary figure on a motorcycle.

Jason took a step forward, smiling all over his face. ‘Now, who in blazes is this?’

Bernice closed her eyes. ‘A human woman,’ she muttered.

Dorothée pulled the bike up alongside them, seemingly oblivious of the strange looks she was getting from passers-by. She flipped off the mirrorshades and winked at Benny. ‘Hiya. You look great. And this must be. . . ’ She stopped, while she looked at Jason, and a slow smile spread over her face.

‘Jason Kane.’ Jason bowed, throwing his hand back in a bloody stupid way.

‘Well. . . ’ Dorothée glanced back to Benny. ‘He’s nice.’

Bernice found that her grip on Jason’s hand had increased to vicelike proportions.

‘ *I* think so,’ she told Dorothée.

26

But something about the way her fiancé and her former travelling companion were looking at each other made her feel very worried indeed.

Keri stood, carrot and microphone in hand, in front of a proud-looking old farmer, a weatherbeaten man with a wide grin, a receding hairline and a twinkle in his eye. Sacks of his produce were heaped against the wheel of his tractor.

‘Well, if you’re interested in carrots,’ he said, ‘I’m your man. They call me Sid “See In The Dark” Seedman.’ He grabbed one of the vegetables from his sack and thrust it under Keri’s nose. ‘That’s the biggest one in these parts,’ he guffawed. ‘And you should see the size of my King Edwards.’

Keri nodded earnestly, aware that the man was stealing lustful glances at something that was to her invisible, a few inches above her head. She wished that she could check just what her holographic image

looked like. ‘Sure. Are we ready to roll, Kit. . . Kevin?’

Kitai paused for a second, unwilling to answer to that name. Finally, he curtly nodded.

Keri silently counted him in and began. ‘Hello, good morning and –’

‘Keri!’ The call came from across the green.

Keri irritatedly made a cutting motion across her throat as she saw Bernice walking quickly towards her. ‘What’s up?’

‘She’s here. Your fellow bridesmaid.’

‘Oh, well, good, but can’t I just finish –’

‘She’s got her bosoms on a shelf, she’s riding a motorcycle, and, having tried several times, I can’t get Jason to take his eyes off her. It’s like something out of a wildlife documentary. Come quickly, please.’

‘Why me?’ Keri looked apologetically between her grinning farmer and the new arrival.

‘Because you can get between his eyes and those breasts. Force of numbers.

Come on.’ Benny grabbed the small Pakhar’s paw, and pulled her off across the green, Keri’s little legs struggling to keep up with the tall human.

‘I really ought to get out of these clothes,’ Dorothée was saying, her elbows propped on the handlebars of the bike.

‘My thoughts exactly.’ Jason was similarly propped up, on the other side of the handlebars.

Dorothée laughed lightly, glancing at the ground. ‘Your fiancée wouldn’t like you to be so flirtatious, monsieur. Know what I mean?’

‘What? Oh, don’t be silly, she knows that –’ Jason glanced up and saw Bernice and Keri coming down the street. As he’d looked at them, they’d 27

screeched to a halt and assumed a jaunty, offhand wander, Benny making hand gestures appropriate for some light conversation.

Big trouble, Jason decided.

He leapt back from the handlebars and stood straight, his hands on his hips.

'So,' he began, 'living in France must be quite fascinating. . . Have you been to the décolletage – I mean the Dordogne?'

Dorothée fixed him with another of her most terrifying gazes. 'I've been everywhere,' she told him.

Jason gulped, glancing between the young woman and his approaching bride-to-be. 'I'm also very well travelled. As Bernice will tell you. Benny' – he slapped a firm hand on Bernice's shoulder, and tried to look upwards, across the fields, anywhere but at the woman on the motorcycle – 'I've been around a bit, haven't I?'

Bernice stared at him. She turned slowly back to Dorothée, and opened her mouth, as if about to say something, but then closed it. Finally, she said: 'Ace, I'd like you to meet your fellow bridesmaid. This is Keri.'

'Hey, an alien, nice to meet you.' Dorothée shook Keri's hand.

'How did you know?' Keri asked.

'That holographic disguise of yours is Nixon Trabelle. You know, the Forces'

Sweetheart? It's a common sight on barracks worlds.'

'And, er, why is that?'

'Because she's the star of over three hundred holoporn classics,' Dorothée laughed. 'You mean you didn't know? Oh, and hey' – she turned back to Benny, leaving Keri frozen to the spot – 'please don't call me Ace. It's Dorothée now, or Dorothy if you want.'

'Fine. Of course.' Benny's tone was as precise and clipped, Jason thought, aware of the weight of her glare, as a bonsai that happened to be a mathematician. Or something. She'd ignored the plight of the Pakhar and concentrated on him. 'Keri will show you to the hotel. You can change into something more suitable. Now, if you'll excuse me, my future husband and I have got a few things to sort out. About the wedding.' She took Jason's arm, and stiffly walked off with him.

He grinned back over his shoulder at Dorothée, but Benny reached her arm up and turned his head back round. He winced.

'Ow.' Left back on the pavement, Dorothée winced in sympathy.

'Is that true, about my holo– holo– oh no!' Keri looked around frantically, feeling a tickling in her snout. She grabbed hold of the bike. 'Help! It's going to – ahhhhhhh –'

She sneezed.

Dorothée looked down at her. 'It's going to what?'

28

Keri slowly let go of the bike, looking fearfully around her. The real world still seemed to be in place. 'Hay fever,' she explained, embarrassed and relieved at the same time. 'You want to see where this guest-house is, yeah?'

'Yeah.' Dorothée stared at the Pakhar in bemusement. 'Hop on.'

Sid and 'Kevin' arrived just in time to see the bike roaring off down the street.

'Pity,' said the farmer. 'I'd like to see more of her. She doesn't look like a journalist to me.'

Kitai took a jaunty bite on a carrot and smiled a secret smile.

'What do you think you're doing?' Bernice had contained her temper until they had reached the narrow lane that led into the car park of the Black Swan. A small ditch ran alongside the alley, and a cloud of midges had impeded their progress, causing both her and Jason to swat the air. That had finally caused her to snap. Now she swung away from Jason's arm and pointed angrily at him. 'Friend of mine she may be, but did I give you permission to stare at that woman's bosoms?'

'I wasn't staring.' Jason sighed, exasperated. 'I was just. . . well, it has been a long time, and. . . '

'You were fascinated by them, like somebody being hypnotized by a swinging watch. If she'd have moved from side to side, you'd have been walking down the street with your arms stretched out, saying "I obey, oh mistress"!'

Jason raised his arms to placate her. ‘I’m a man. Those were mammary glands. It’s one of the fundamental attractions of the universe, like gravity. I am not to blame if my nose just naturally heads towards –’

‘What about mine? What about these?’ Benny tapped her chest. ‘I know that one requires very powerful sensing equipment merely to register them, but you’d better get used to them, because quite soon they’ll be the only ones you’ve got. Apart from your own, of course, which are quite impressive.’

‘Are you saying –’ Jason breathed in and raised himself to his full height –

‘that I’m *chubby*?’

‘Not at all. Of course, you may be quite portly compared to all these incredibly muscular young farmhands that are about the place, but I haven’t noticed because *I don’t look*!’

‘You don’t look? I have never heard anything more ridiculous! Is this what married life is going to be like, both of us giving no hint of even noticing the opposite sex? I think you’ve got your religious institutions mixed up, because that sounds like life in a *monastery*!’

‘Well, I don’t think we’re ever going to find out what married life is like. Not if your vows of fidelity don’t even stretch to the *bridesmaids*!’

29

The two of them stood looking at each other for a moment, panting. This was usually the time when they decided on which row-ending option they were going to follow.

It was perhaps just as well, then, that at that moment James the verger wandered by, and glanced at his watch. ‘Hi guys,’ he said. ‘Nearly opening time. Fancy a pint?’

Bernice and Jason woke up back in the big bed in the Hutchingses’ spare room. Late-afternoon sunlight was filtering through the curtains. They were both fully clothed.

Bernice pinched the flesh at the top of her nose and manipulated it between her fingers. ‘I just had the strangest dream,’ she told Jason, sitting up slowly.

‘But I can’t remember what it was.’

‘We were shouting at each other,’ Jason groaned, struggling to get up. His shirt had been pulled nearly off one shoulder, revealing a scratch that looked exactly the sort of thing Bernice did to him in moments of passion.

‘So this was a fairly mundane sort of dream, then.’ Benny let go of her nose and adjusted the top of her sundress. ‘What happened? The last thing I remember we were –’

‘We had a couple of pints at the Black Swan, and then came back here. I think we wanted to rip each other’s clothes off, but, I fear –’

‘We fell asleep. Typical us. A couple of pints?’ Benny rubbed her brow again. ‘It must have been more than that, dear.’

He put his arms around her gently. ‘I remember that I said some terrible things when we were rowing. Isn’t it awful that we’re so used to that that we actually have a name for it? We call it rowing, and it’s something that we do, like a hobby.’

‘It’s because we’re both terribly afraid.’ Bernice took his hands and held them across her breasts. ‘You’re afraid of getting hitched. And so am I, I suppose. But I’m also afraid every time you look at another woman. We’ve both been alone too long to trust any of this.’

‘Then it’s good that we’re not alone any more.’ He kissed her neck. ‘So we can get out of thinking that way.’

She raised her hands and stroked his hair, enjoying the feel of him clum-sily undoing her buttons. ‘I know you’d never be unfaithful to me,’ Bernice whispered. ‘I know that absolutely.’

There was a knock on the door.

Bernice sprang to her feet, quickly doing up her dress. ‘Come in!’ Jason leant back on the bed, his hands thrown up behind his head, laughing and looking unashamedly coital.

30

Ishtar poked her perfect head around the door. She looked slowly between the two lovers and allowed herself a grin. ‘Emily says stop shagging and come down for tea.’

## The Power of Cheap Music

Dorothée eased open the door of the Doctor's room at Mrs Higgins's, and peeped through the gap. She was dressed more soberly now, in a baseball jacket, jeans and a 'Johnny Chess Lives' T-shirt that she'd bought from the village shop.

Something was trying to tell her that the interior of the room was neatly kept, a single book lying open on the bed. Dorothée considered that image as one would consider a dream after waking. It was a stupid picture, one that she wasn't actually part of. Her brain made one of the careful selections that it was used to making every time she used the time-jump device, and Dorothée felt herself deciding that the room wasn't like that at all.

That, for the second that it took, was an interesting process in itself. It started as a moment of *déjà vu*, as if she was seeing the room again, having experienced it somehow years ago. Then there was an instant of creation, like Dorothée herself was deciding what the room really looked like. Then she found that she could see the room as it was. The Doctor had littered the place with discarded instruments and apparatus. In one corner, twin trees of bric-a-brac were being constructed, each one turning on its axis in the breeze from the open window.

Dorothée wandered over to one and inspected it. An empty baked-beans can formed its base, with a car radio aerial rotating gently inside it, supported by a wheel from a children's construction set. She reached up to one of the coat-hanger branches and spun it, listening to the tinkling as the tiny bells on one of the branches rang against each other.

That business of creation had bothered her when she'd first started using the time-jump device. She'd tracked some strange time disturbances to Iceland, and, having put together a pack of tools and weaponry, set off to investigate.

But when she'd arrived she'd had that feeling of *making* the place that she'd arrived in. It took her a full day of stamping around on the ice floes to believe that this wasn't the Land of Fiction or something, a place of her own mind's creation. The boredom of the ice had persuaded her, finally. She'd found only a Voltranon satellite, a relic of their assault on Sydney. One shot into the powerpack and the

disturbance was over. She'd kicked it into a rift in the glacier.

Still, the idea that these were her own worlds, her destinations in time, 33

had never left her. It was strange to be back in Cheldon Bonniface, on that score. Last time she'd been here, she'd ended up in an alternative future of her own, where she'd stayed at home and just been plain old Dorothy. She was so much older now, and it sometimes felt as if she'd experienced quite a few alternatives.

She stopped, and lowered her hand from the spinning rod.

She wanted to snap round, snatch the weapon from her hip, blast at the target that was just out of sight, right behind her left ear.

But she had no weapon. She hadn't carried one for a year now – ever since she'd scared Sorin that night, and found him kicking a statue on the balcony, scared to death of her, and not wanting to be seen to be frightened of his lover.

Her reflexes, she'd decided as she held him, were for another time, another her. Not only were they inappropriate to her life now, they were positively melodramatic.

Or perhaps she'd decided that the next morning, when she'd found that the Count had gone. She didn't want to think about that.

She turned slowly, and saw him standing there by the door.

The Ka Faraq Gatri. In her years fighting the Daleks, Dorothée had begun to understand how they thought of him. How much that inquiring, flickering stare terrified them. How much the stillness of his body, which had the possibility of so much movement, made them wonder about a dark sky over them, and the sudden streaks of lightning that might make their empire, their guns, their whole philosophy, suddenly. . . nothing. His gaze was like that now, in the moment that he was at the door. He was an avatar of a little god of time, the only being that ever took on the whole burden of what time was, all those cruelties and insanities and horrors, and yet his eyes could still stare calmly at it. If he made the times that he appeared in, he would quietly accept that, and do what he needed to do, and move his pieces a few inches. Because, amongst all that chaos, he still believed in something. That, on its own, was reassuring.

For a moment their eyes met, the dragon and the apprentice, who'd

interfered with his experiment.

And then his face broke into a huge and stupid smile. ‘Ace!’ the Doctor cried. ‘You’re here!’ He dived across the room, grabbed both her hands, and spun her around, his toes slamming against hers to form a centre of balance.

‘I thought I’d have to pick you up. You look well. How’s Sorin? How are you?

How’s the time-jump device? Working, obviously. You must have boosted it to get here. Well done. Or was it an accident? If there are accidents.’ He made that sound in his throat that meant that a train of thought had got away from him and he wanted to let it go. Then he let her go. Dorothée landed in a pile on the bed, and the Doctor, as usual, remained absolutely upright. He didn’t 34

even look dizzy, other than that he still wore a beautiful smile. ‘Sorry. I got carried away. Do you want some tea?’

Dorothée struggled into a sitting position on the bed and hugged her knees.

‘Two and milk, thanks.’

The Doctor made his way to a kettle and a clutter of teabags that sat on a tray in the corner of the room. He glanced over his shoulder at her from time to time as he filled the kettle. ‘How old are you now?’

‘Thirty-one.’

‘Ah, you’re catching up with Benny.’

‘Don’t rub it in.’

‘You look younger. That’s the thing about time travel. Keeps your complex-ion fresh.’ He pinched a frownline on his forehead and frowned up at it. ‘Up to a point.’ He poured two cups, and leapt onto the bed, crossing his legs under him and offering Dorothée one of the cups in one movement.

Dorothée took it, and, more gingerly, crossed her legs too. They sat facing each other as if in some strange tea ceremony. Dorothée slurped her tea and sighed. ‘That’s good. The French can’t make tea. They think they can, right?

But they can't.'

'Are you enjoying the lifestyle?'

'Can't complain. Me and Count Sorin pretended to be married, so I'm a Sorina now. As well as a Dorothée.'

'Pretended?'

'What are those things?' Her gaze had flicked to the Doctor's constructions by the window.

'Time-flow analogues. The TARDIS instruments don't show anything, but when I got here I wanted another reading. A rougher one.'

'You think there's going to be time trouble at the wedding?'

'No. That is, there's no sign of it at all. But there are a lot of guests coming, from many times and places. I've been dropping invitations off everywhere, and getting lots of interstitial RSVPs. Put that number of extratemporal people together in one place, and somebody will notice. They'll all have enemies, too.'

Dorothée smiled. 'You hope. What have you got to do otherwise?'

'Give away the bride,' the Doctor muttered darkly. 'That's trouble enough.'

'Oh, come on Professor, it can't be that hard.'

The Doctor grinned toothily at her. 'Say that again.'

'What, "Professor"?'

The Doctor sipped his tea, his eyes full of distance. 'It's been so long since I've heard that. Tell me, do you want to come for a quick hop in the TARDIS?'

Dorothée reached over and touched his nose with the tip of her finger. 'Only if you call me Ace.'

* * *

35

Dorothée looked wistfully around the console room, and shook her head.

‘Didn’t it used to be bigger?’

‘No.’ The Doctor finished programming coordinates into the keyboard with a flourish. ‘That’s just how you remember it.’

‘So where are we going?’

‘I thought we’d pick up some of the musicians that Bernice asked for. They’ll need some time to rehearse, so it makes sense to get them first.’

‘Musicians?’ Dorothée leant heavily on the console and watched the central column rise and fall. ‘Hey, does that mean we’re going to find Danny?’

‘Not this trip. But yes. In 1997.’

‘So he’s dead by now, then?’ Dorothée asked lightly.

The Doctor paused, then slowly slid a control into position with the tip of his finger. ‘Yes. A lorry mounted the pavement outside his house in February 1998. Danny was pushing a pushchair with his youngest daughter in it. He took a moment to heave it aside. He was crushed.’ The Doctor’s voice sounded distant, like that of a connoisseur appreciating a work of art in a quiet gallery.

‘Don’t tell him.’

‘’Course not.’ Dorothée straightened up from the console, and went to lean on the Doctor’s shoulder. The look on her face was one of professional detachment. ‘That’s the way it goes. Benny doesn’t know, does she?’

‘No. She’s not ready. Perhaps she never will be.’

Dorothée allowed herself a deep breath. ‘Let’s hope not, eh?’ And then, before the Doctor could say anything else, she bounced up again and wandered off around the perimeter of the console. ‘You know what I did the other day?

I put together a CD player out of tech bits. I shut myself away in the west wing, and told all the servants to take the day off –’

‘Servants? And you used to be so politically correct.’

‘Look who’s talking. Anyway, I bunged on the old Stone Roses CD. The first one. I hadn’t heard it for about ten years. I was dancing about the

room, remembering when I'd first heard the music, and who I'd been with, and all that stuff.'

'Ah, the power of cheap music,' the Doctor mused. 'It's almost like the remembrance of a scent, how that can take you back. Regress you. Smother you in nostalgia.'

'I was thinking about the Timewyrm, how much that music had been in my head when I was. . . well, when I was in yours.'

'And are the memories good?'

Dorothée paused. 'Most of them. The bad stuff gets dumped, anyway. You only remember the good bits, and you always love people better when you've got a bit of distance on them.'



The Doctor grinned, and checked a tiny course control, looking away. 'Did you meet the Hutchings family, before you came to see me?'

'No, I wanted to find you first. Lots of stuff to do with Emily and that Christmas that's still a bit prickly. I was seriously thinking of settling down here.'

'You should see Ishtar. She'll make you feel old.'

'Cheers, Professor. Just what I need.'

The Doctor put a hand to his chin, his fingers flickering as his gaze wandered off into the distance. 'I remember a time when that music was all I heard about the TARDIS. Every time I passed the door of your room it was the Stone Roses. Or that terrible song about football.'

'Yeah, well, "World In Motion" is a terrible song, but it's great as well, right?

John Barnes was a big influence on me back then. You've got to hold and give, but do it at the right time?'

'There's only one way to beat them: get round the back.'

'I didn't think you were listening to what I put on my ghetto blaster.'

'Oh, I did. How does that tune go? "Have you seen her, have you heard. . . "

’ The Doctor tapped a surprisingly proficient drum break on the surface of the console. Dorothée joined in, slapping the edge of the console and singing along.

The central column shuddered and came to a halt. The Doctor stopped singing and bit his lip. ‘Oh. Either the TARDIS doesn’t like our singing, or we’re here!’

Three black men in their late twenties sat around a portable television in a plush apartment off the King’s Road, munching absently from a plate of sandwiches.

‘This is so dull,’ Ronald Isley moaned, gesturing at the screen. ‘These guys knock the ball around for ninety minutes, and if nobody scores then they just pack all their stuff away and leave.’

‘That’s England, brother.’ His elder brother, O’Kelly, grinned, taking a bite from his sandwich. ‘You wanted to come here, same as us.’

‘Yeah, but I didn’t know about no World Cup. How’s it the World Cup, anyhow, if we ain’t involved?’

‘Just like the World Series,’ Rudolph Isley murmured. Unlike the others, he was intent on the action on the screen. ‘Look at this guy, Bobby Charlton. He’s like O’Kelly. Losing his hair, but plenty of style. He’s – hey! Yeah!’ Rudolph threw up his hands in triumph as the ball went into the back of the net. ‘They scored!’

O’Kelly and Ronald looked at each other and shrugged. Rudolph glanced back at them. ‘Well, Britain’s been good to us,’ he said. ‘It’s good to get the 37

local culture, dig?’

The argument that would have started at that point was interrupted by a strange noise that permeated the walls of the apartment. Beside the purple sofa, and neatly eclipsing the psychedelic print that took up most of the far wall, a blue box faded into view.

‘Shoot,’ Ronald leapt up, letting his plate drop to the carpet. ‘It’s a flying saucer!’

‘It is not a flying saucer.’ O’Kelly pointed at the sign on the door. ‘It’s a police box. Like they have on the street corner here. ’Cept it appeared in our living room.’

‘They’re gonna wonder if we were straight when we tell them about this.’

Rudolph stepped gingerly forward to the box, and touched it.

The door swung open, and out stepped a small man and a young woman.

The man grinned apologetically, looking around himself in concern. ‘Oh dear,’

he murmured. ‘I didn’t mean to make such a dramatic entrance.’

‘Who are you, man? I mean, like, do you come in peace, ’cos we don’t mean you no harm?’ Ronald Isley carefully showed his palms to the Doctor.

‘No harm? No. I come as a fan. You must be Ronald, pleased to meet you.’

The little man took one of Ronald’s upturned hands and shook it eagerly.

The other two brothers looked at each other. ‘Are you saying that we’re famous in space?’ O’Kelly asked.

‘In space. In time. Wherever there’s intelligent life, there’s somebody playing “Twist And Shout”,’ the man confirmed, rushing over to shake their hands too. ‘I’m the Doctor and this is my friend. . . Ace. And we’re here to ask you a favour. About a gig. . . ’

As the brothers clustered warmly around the Doctor, still not quite believing what they were hearing, Dorothée wandered over to the television set. She pointed at the screen and called to the Doctor. ‘Hey, Professor! They think it’s all over.’ She turned back to the screen, and realized that she was watching the jubilant players celebrating the end of the match. ‘Oh. It is now. . . ’

Rudolph smiled at her and laughed. ‘Don’t worry, girl, that’s just a soccer match. This is history in the making!’

Dorothée gave a sad smile for a moment, and then turned to meet the Isley Brothers. As she shook O’Kelly’s hand she said: ‘You lot ever do “Puff The Magic Dragon”?’

Jason looked down at the shape of the duvet beside him, the corner of his jaw propped on his hand. Bernice had the cover pulled up over her head, as always.

'I couldn't even persuade you to grow your hair,' he whispered. 'You won't change, you bloody woman, because you think any change is surrendering.

So do I act like I'm not scared, and brazen it out, and end up with a wife? Or do I do a runner?'

It wasn't as if the loving hadn't been good. He wasn't used to being touched so often. It was as if his skin had become sensitized now, used to somebody folding their arms around him from behind, waiting all the time for a hug or a caress. It made him aware of how alone he'd been, out there in space, where everybody he'd met had been an alien. All those strange body languages, all those odd scents. Of course he'd fallen in love with the first real human woman that he'd met. He hadn't been able to help it. It was bloody cruel of her, to return that feeling. She had a choice. And now he was saddled with. . .

But that wasn't true. Not exactly. Not at all! He *did* love her, but what did that mean? If he could look at Dorothée like that today, enjoy flirting with her, start, unconsciously, to plan ways to see her alone again. . . Maybe he should stop all this marriage nonsense now. Any sociologist would say that you couldn't decide who you were in love with until you'd met a few people.

Known. . . a few people.

He slowly lowered his head into the pillows and thumped it quietly against them.

Then he raised it again. Right. No point in that. Action needed. It'd be easier on her, in the end.

He lifted the covers from his side of the bed, and replaced them gently behind him. He glanced up at the window. The moon was up. Shouldn't be too hard to find his way down to the road. His small suitcase was waiting there by the door. He'd never unpacked it.

He tiptoed towards the case, wondering whether to risk putting something on now, or to dress in the corridor. Ishtar was still probably out, and he didn't want her to meet him in the altogether. Well. . . no,

never mind that now.

He was considering what to get out of his case when his toe caught on something. The tassled corner of the duvet cover. He realized that just as he 39

pulled the duvet right off on to the floor. He turned, about to say that he was on his way to the bathroom.

And saw that, under the duvet, there was just a pile of pillows.

Jason stood there, his mouth open, horrified. He switched the light on, and saw that Bernice's cases were gone. He closed his mouth, then opened it again.

A sudden horror ran through him. He pulled some trousers from his case, fighting to get into their legs, and hopped awkwardly towards the door.

Jason ran out into the streets of the little village, looking around desperately.

He wanted to call out, but didn't want to hear the empty sound of his own voice echoing back at him.

He chose a direction, and sprinted off down the street, heading for the green where the TARDIS stood. Where else did she have to go?

He saw her standing there, by a patch of lightened, flattened grass. The TARDIS had gone. She was wearing her headscarf and dufflecoat, her luggage piled beside her. Her hands were in her pockets, and she was staring off towards the dark woods, thinking about something sad.

If he'd really thought about it, what he would have liked to do was make his way quietly back to the Hutchings house, before she noticed him. He'd have brought the matter up quietly the next morning, or, more likely, sulked about it for a week. But he couldn't do that. The TARDIS might have returned. She might have actually gone.

He slowed to a walk as he approached her. 'Bernice,' he said.

She jumped, startled, and then closed her eyes when she saw it was him, taking a deep breath. 'Jason.'

'What are you doing here?' he asked, uselessly.

‘I was taking the suitcases for a walk, actually. . . ’ She couldn’t seem to look at him, hugging herself. ‘Suitcases get really irritable if they’re cooped up over a long period of time. They get afraid, and all sorts of strange thoughts get into their heads.’

‘Bernice. . . ’

‘You could pop off back to the house, if you wanted. I’ll be back soon.’

‘No you won’t! When he comes back, you’ll be gone!’ Jason was surprised to find that he was shouting, a rather terrible, high-pitched sort of shout that made him sound like a little boy again, shouting because he was afraid of the dark.

Bernice looked as scared by the sound of it as he was. She took a step towards him, choosing her words carefully. ‘I just. . . It seems silly now. I couldn’t sleep, and Emily’s getting annoyed at us staying with her, I know she is. I wanted to be back in my old room. For a night.’ She took a deep breath.



‘For a night.’ He nodded, considering the suggestion. ‘That’s fine. You didn’t have to leave pillows in your bed. That’s fine. I’ll go back.’ He turned.

She grabbed his arm. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’

‘For what?’ He wouldn’t acknowledge her. ‘What are you sorry about?’

‘Come here. Please, just come here.’ She enfolded the awkwardness of him in her arms, all his muscles tensed into one unyielding shape. He didn’t fight her, but he didn’t encourage her either, his eyes still locked at some point in the distance, his face clenched against sobbing. ‘I love you so much. I’m not going to leave you all alone.’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘You were talking in your sleep. About Dorothée.’

‘Oh –’ And he made a stark, straightforward statement about his feelings towards Dorothée at this exact point in time.

Bernice nodded. ‘That was the gist, yes.’

He turned and held her tightly, his muscles relaxing. ‘Do you seriously think that I’m going to leave you, just because I fancy somebody else?’

‘Yes!’ Bernice was laughing now. It was odd how their sadness often turned that way, the both of them. It was as though they weren’t used to such intense emotions, didn’t really know what they were. ‘I think that’s a reasonable thing to assume, don’t you? Considering the options. I heard you muttering about doing all sorts of things and –’

‘That’s my unconscious. Don’t laugh at my unconscious.’

‘Jason, tell me the truth. You do love me, don’t you?’

Jason took a deep breath. ‘I. . . ’ He couldn’t say ‘I do’. He tried to form the words in his mind, and felt Bernice tensing in his arms, afraid. ‘I. . . ’ This was so ridiculous. He settled on something easier. ‘Yes. I love you.’

‘God.’ Bernice exhaled. These emotional exchanges took so much energy out of them both. ‘We’re both in the woods still, aren’t we?’

‘The woods.’ Jason looked up from holding her, and nodded in the direction of the dark mass of trees on the horizon. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. ‘Shall we?’

Bernice frowned, and plucked at a hair on his nipple. ‘What about the suitcases?’

Jason repeated his comment concerning Dorothée, this time with regard to the suitcases.

‘There’s no need to go that far, my love,’ Bernice whispered, kissing him quickly. ‘I’m quite willing to oblige.’

Chris Cwej moved his arms up and down, grinning all over his face, and stamped his feet to the rhythmic beat of the music. Ishtar laughed at him, running her hands back through her hair. Tasham had only one nightclub: 41

Ghoti’s, which attracted patrons from all up and down the coast. It was Friday night, so the DJ was playing exclusively Bantu. Not that Chris would have been able to tell. He was just bouncing his elbows up and down, and, apart from those occasions on which he sent somebody spinning off the dancefloor with a particularly ill-timed bounce, nobody seemed to mind. Indeed, quite a few of the girls were smiling at him. Chris finally shook his head at his own lack of rhythm, and made excessive sighs of relief when Ish took his hand and led him off to the bar.

She ordered a diet beer for herself and a pint of orange juice for him. They took their drinks to the Quiet Room, and sprawled in a beanbag.

'I envy you, Chris,' Ish told him. 'I wish I got to travel in the TARDIS.'

'It's great,' he agreed. 'Roz just wants to go somewhere interesting all the time, but I like being able to step out on to some new planet. . . smell the air.'

'You're so sweet.' Ish laid her head on his broad shoulder. She considered for a moment. 'Have you ever killed anybody?'

Chris's eyes widened. 'Erm, well, yeah, in the pursuit of my duties. But there was never really any choice.'

'What about Roz?'

'She. . . ' Chris paused. 'She takes a broader view of her duties than I do.'

'And have you and her ever been to bed together?'

Chris guffawed, spilling his drink. He continued to laugh as he wiped the juice from the beanbag. 'That's. . . that's the funniest thing I've ever heard.

Me and her? I'm her Squire.'

Ish was about to say that she didn't think it was so strange, but she caught something that two girls on the next beanbag were saying.

Something about a man with a rough chin and a big shirt.

She slapped a hand over Chris's mouth to stop him from laughing any more and listened.

'Jason. He said he was from outer space, and the way he talks I can believe it.' One of the girls got to her feet and swayed towards the door to the dancefloor.

Her friend followed. 'And was he –?'

The first girl laughed as she disappeared into the crowd. 'Like a baboon.

But he didn't know what to do with it.'

Chris's eyes slowly moved from the girls to the shocked Ishtar. 'Mm-fhh.'

She took her hand away from his mouth. 'Did I hear what I just thought I heard?'

'We shouldn't jump to conclusions. There are lots of guys called Jason. It's almost certainly not him.'

Ishtar met his gaze. 'Big shirt? Outer space?'

Chris sighed and drained his drink. 'Baboon.'

* * *

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They got back to the doorway of Emily's and Peter's house at about three in the morning, having taken the automatic night train along the little branch line that ran from Tasharn to Cheldon Junction and walked the half-mile home.

The first light of dawn was already showing in the east. 'I suppose this is goodbye,' said Chris.

'I wish I could invite you in,' Ishtar sighed. 'Emily and Peter still treat me as if I'm a baby.'

'They care about you. And it's not like we haven't had our chances.' He rubbed delicately at the love bite that marked the base of his neck.

Ishtar kissed him, and the kiss became passionate and lengthy, the two of them leaning back against the wall of the house.

'Goodness, it must be contagious.' The voice made Ishtar and Chris leap apart. Bernice and Jason stood there, a pile of suitcases at their feet, bits of fern and leaves in their hair.

Chris relaxed. 'Benny, your timing is really great, as always.' He glanced down. 'What's with the cases?'

Jason glanced at Benny happily. 'We were just showing them the local sites of outstanding natural beauty.'

'Oh,' Ishtar cut in. 'I hear you do that quite a lot. Tasham's particularly nice.'

‘Is it?’ Jason didn’t seem to have noticed the weight of her comment as he picked a twig from Benny’s hair. ‘We must go and see.’

Ishtar took a deep breath, about to make her meaning clear, but Chris put a hand on her arm. ‘Well, I guess we’d better all be –’

The sound of the TARDIS materializing drifted over the village from the green, loud against the slight chorus of waking birds and the distant lowing of cattle.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ Benny tousled her hair. ‘I’m only getting my dress fitted tomorrow. We might as well go and see who the first guests are.’ And, taking Jason by the arm, she led him off in the direction of the village green.

Jason looked over his shoulder at Chris and Ishtar and called, ‘I’m going to marry this woman. Isn’t it great?’

The two young lovers set off after them at a slower pace. ‘Outer space. . . ’

mused Chris.

‘Baboon,’ added Ishtar, shaking her head in bafflement.

The TARDIS was back in its position on the green by the time they reached it.

Outside it stood the Isley Brothers, who were looking around in awe, and the Doctor and Dorothée.

‘This ain’t twenty ten.’ Ronald glanced back at the Doctor, an expression of doubt on his face.

‘Yeah, where’s the flying cars and spaceships and stuff?’ Rudolph asked.

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O’Kelly clapped his brothers round their shoulders and smiled at them. ‘Hey, this is just a little British village, and they don’t change none. You saw the interior of the man’s vehicle back there. He means what he says. Our Lord’s grace has kept the world together for fifty more years. Isn’t that great?’

Benny and Jason approached the Doctor and Dorothée, Jason trying not to look at the young woman. After a moment she realized what he

was doing, scowled and turned away.

‘Are these people,’ Bernice asked, taking the Doctor’s arm, ‘who I think they are?’

O’Kelly raised his hands to the rising sun and sang a perfect note. His brothers chimed in. ‘Morning has broken. . . ’ they began, in perfect harmony,

‘like the first morning. . . ’

Bernice hugged the Doctor like a little girl on Christmas morning. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

Jason and Dorothée had wandered to opposite sides of the little crowd of people, still not looking at each other.

Ishtar and Chris leant on each other, enjoying the sound of the Brothers’ voices, and the sheer surrealism of the scene. Ishtar whispered in her boyfriend’s ear: ‘And it’s going to get weirder before it gets better.’

## 44

## Frocks

Keri started knocking on Kitai’s door at a very early hour, and kept on knocking until he let her in.

She strode into his nestroom, shaking off the feeling that it was actually an immaculately kept human bedroom, and pointed to her holographic form.

‘You adjusted the holo-projector, didn’t you?’

Kitai nodded, inflating his cheek pouches in a Pakhar expression of grudging apology.

‘So now everybody sees me, who’s supposed to be a serious journalist, as a generously proportioned porn star, yeah?’

Kitai let his pouches deflate a little, admitting his guilt.

‘So you either change this to something that’ll get me a bit of respect, or when we get back home you’ll find yourself covering nothing *but* weddings, you straw-sucking little furball!’

Kitai took a step back, stunned by the force of her anger. Then he quickly scuttled forward, and fiddled with the controls on the belt-mounted box that maintained the holographic image.

He stepped back, relieved, and raised his paws in supplication.

'Good.' Keri stamped to the door, then turned and faced the errant Pakhar once more. 'I'm trying on my bridesmaid's dress today. Which is going to be hard work in itself, yeah? I hope that this new image is going to make it easier.'

Then she left.

Kitai waited until she was out of audible range, and then fell into his nest, giggling.

Miss Gjovaag and Miss Kusinitz owned the village dress-making and dress hire service, something they'd started upon arrival as part of the great influx of Dutch settlers five years ago. The two old ladies had found that their ideas of craft and attention to detail were suddenly very fashionable in the atmosphere of the Reconstruction, and their skills had brought several famous visitors to Cheldon Bonniface.

They wondered, of course, when Bernice arrived two months ago, and then popped back to check the progress of the dresses every two weeks or so, wearing the same clothes every time. They wondered how it was that she tried to 45

resume a conversation that they'd had with her across that two-week gap, exactly at the point where she left it. But they did not comment. Bernice was every inch their idea of the English bride, and she was paying in cash.

They had tried to persuade her to have the dress in white, of course, or at least a nice cream. 'Cream, it does not say that you've been, well, putting it about. It says that perhaps your designers told you it was white.'

Bernice had leant on the old-fashioned sewing machine that the ladies kept in the corner, and sighed at the various white fabrics that the ladies were showing her. 'Unfortunately, I have been putting it about. Not as much as a friend of mine, who'd need a dress of pure scarlet with a target on the bustle, but enough to blanch at the white. You don't have a nice orange, do you?'

'Orange?' Miss Kusinitz had let out a long breath that made her lips

flap.

‘The customer’s always right, Miss Summerfield, but I have to say, you’re not *particularly* right.’ They’d finally persuaded her to try a very delicate shade of light blue.

So, altogether, the two old ladies were looking forward to the arrival of this most interesting customer today, and especially wondering what her bridesmaids would be like. Bernice had given them their measurements, and, according to those, one of them was really quite a strange shape.

Bernice arrived first, and accepted a cup of coffee from Miss Gjovaag blearily.

‘My dear,’ the dressmaker said, ‘you look like you’re not getting enough sleep.

Are you getting nervous about the wedding?’

Bernice considered telling them that she’d been up all night shagging in bracken, but thought that this would probably set off another argument about dress colour. ‘Yes.’

‘Miss Kusinitz and I never married. . . ’ Miss Gjovaag reflected, sadly.

‘Oh, but you had your moments, Laura,’ Miss Kusinitz chuckled. ‘Remember that dancer in Prague? He tried to persuade us that he’d won the Eurovision Song Contest. He wanted to show you his statuette.’

Miss Gjovaag ignored her partner, stepping between her and Bernice. ‘So, my dear, where are your bridesmaids?’

‘They should be here any minute.’ Bernice glanced at her watch. Just then, the shop doorbell rang again, and Keri and Dorothée wandered in, both looking bright and breezy. Bernice saluted them with her cup, noting that Keri had changed her appearance again. They were going to have to tell the dressmakers the difficult truth about her today. ‘Ladies. We who are about to. . . et cetera. . . ’

Miss Gjovaag and Miss Kusinitz curtsied to the newcomers. ‘Ah, I can see why those measurements were so strange!’ Miss Kusinitz giggled.

‘Your little joke, madam.’ Miss Gjovaag smiled. ‘Do come through – we have your garments ready.’ Smiling proudly at each other, the ladies ushered Keri into the back room.

Dorothée remained for a moment while Bernice finished her coffee. ‘Can you tell Jason to stop ignoring me?’ she asked bluntly.

‘Is he ignoring you?’ Bernice affected ignorance. ‘I can’t tell him to do anything.’

‘Listen, I’m not trying to break you two up. I was only talking to him. But now he’s gone all weird. He won’t even look at me.’

Benny softened slightly. ‘He’s not used to human company yet. I think he’s still at the point where he thinks that he has to either make love to you or ignore you completely.’

‘But –’

‘I will have a word.’

‘Cheers.’ Dorothée paused, and gently put a hand on Benny’s shoulder. ‘It’s been years. Come out for a pint tonight.’

‘Oh, I need no second bidding. I’ll probably fall asleep, though.’

Dorothée smiled. Miss Kusinitz stuck her head out from the back room.

‘Ladies?’

Keri was staring at the roundish, shortish bubble of a dress that was awkwardly sitting, as if supported by its own shape, on a table in the back room.

Miss Gjovaag had tried to hustle it away as the result of ‘madam’s joke’, but Keri had stopped her, awkwardly waiting for the others. She wanted to say that it looked perfect – but that would give the game away a bit.

Bernice didn’t notice Keri’s predicament when she entered, so pleased was she by the look of her dress. It was flowing, backless and blue, with a train propped up on a series of chairs that seemed to extend a vast distance across the room. ‘Goodness,’ she breathed. ‘I rather lack the words. I mean, I’d like to jump up and down and clap, but that would be completely gauche.’

‘People do,’ Miss Kusinitz assured her.

Dorothée fluffed up the shoulders on her matching bridesmaid’s dress.

‘Time was I wouldn’t have been seen dead in this,’ she muttered. ‘But compared to some of the stuff I squeeze into these days. . . ’

Keri discreetly tapped Benny on the arm, and nodded towards her dress.

‘Shall we tell them?’

Miss Kusinitz overheard. She curtsied before Keri again. ‘There’s nothing to tell. We’re known for our discretion, and, if I might presume to say, there’s no 47

mistaking your good self. I heard you had a tremendous sense of humour, but you surpassed yourself with those measurements, your Royal Highness.’

Keri put both her paws over her eyes, and made a small, despairing squeak.

Peter Hutchings walked past the village green, his briefcase under his arm, pleased to see that the police box was still sitting there. He’d been at a conference on Knot Theory in Stoke, where one of the delegates had actually approached him nervously and given him a couple of Emily’s books for her to sign. That’d please her.

He was surprised to see Lord Tasham sitting on the bench opposite the green, regarding the police box with interest, stroking his beard. The local landowner always had time for a kind word to Peter, and, on the rare occasions when he ventured into the Black Swan, usually bought drinks all round. He was a central figure in the local Reconstruction movement, so much so that most people had forgotten how he’d been the subject of protests over his farming methods a few years ago.

‘Hello, your Lordship,’ Peter greeted him.

‘My dear Mr Hutchings, please refer to me as Alec, or Mr Steel if you are feeling particularly formal.’ His Lordship inclined his head in deference to the professor of mathematics. ‘I do so detest the vulgar semantics of rank.’

‘What do you think of our police box?’

‘A most. . . intriguing addition to the village. Have you by any chance seen its. . . ’ He paused, seeming to search for the correct word for a moment, ‘. . . its owner?’

‘He’s staying at the guest-house. Why, do you want to make a complaint?’

His Lordship raised a gloved hand. ‘Not at all. I merely wished to make the acquaintance of the artist behind such a. . . curiously familiar object.’

Peter smiled. ‘You can’t miss him. Anyway, my wife’s expecting me home, and –’

‘Of course. Please don’t allow me to detain you any further.’

Before Peter turned the corner of the street, he glanced over his shoulder.

Lord Tasham remained on the bench, his gaze still intent on the TARDIS.

Peter shrugged and went on his way.

Anybody passing in the street outside Kusinitz and Gjovaag’s that morning might have heard a small, shrill scream from inside the shop, a bit like that which an old lady might make upon seeing a mouse.

Or indeed, a giant hamster.

Felicity Kusinitz knelt over her partner, wafting a bottle of smelling salts under her nose. ‘Laura. Wake up.’



Laura did so, opened her eyes, pointed at Keri and opened her mouth to scream again. Miss Kusinitz put a stem finger up in front of her gums. ‘Stop, Miss Gjovaag. You’re scaring our customers. It’s like Dusseldorf all over again.’

‘Our. . . customers?’ Miss Gjovaag glanced giddily between Keri and her partner. ‘One of our customers is a. . . ’

‘They’re called Pakhars,’ Bernice volunteered, squatting beside the distressed draper. ‘They’re very peaceful, but they come from another planet.

That not being in the traditional wedding books, we thought it best to create an illusion.'

'We did say to get ready for a shock,' Dorothée added, helping Miss Gjovaag to get to her feet.

'What can I say?' Keri spread her paws wide. 'I'm furry. I'm really sorry, yeah?'

Miss Kusinitz stood to her full height, and clicked her fingers. Miss Gjovaag adjusted her hair and, with an effort, regained her composure. You have no reason to apologize, madam.' Her face fell for a moment. 'It is. . . '

Keri nodded. 'Call me Keri.'

Miss Kusinitz addressed the Pakhar courteously. 'Let me offer both our apologies. Never previously in the history of Kusinitz and Gjovaag have we confused an alien being with a member of the Royal Family.'

'Never indeed,' her partner piped up, 'have we had the opportunity.'

'But you are still our customer, madam. It is not for us to question or discuss the solar system of your origin. Indeed, I'm glad to discover that the fabric used in the construction of your dress has not gone to waste. Now, before we begin the fitting, a complimentary cup of tea might be in order.'

'Absolutely,' Bernice said. 'And while we drink it, I think we ought to tell you ladies exactly what this wedding's going to be like.'

The dressmakers listened intently over tea to the full story of Bernice's courtship and engagement, their eyes opening so wide that Benny thought their glasses were going to crack under the pressure.

'Goodness me,' Miss Gjovaag breathed. 'We are fortunate to have you here.

Everybody says that there are aliens, especially on Mars –'

'Got some of them coming.' Dorothée had propped her heels up on one of the chairs supporting the train. 'Your governments know all about them, but don't know what to say to you yet, so they're still a secret.'

'That's a rather simplified account of the Ice Warriors' situation right

now,'

Benny noted. 'Various powers on Earth have picked up their broadcasts, but nobody's actually met one. However, we have sent an invite. Although whether we'll be able to get the particular individuals we're after is another 49

matter. Time travel and all that. Very hard to arrange any sort of function across time and space.'

'He isn't an alien, is he?' Miss Kusinitz asked, ignoring a warning glance from her partner. 'Your prospective husband?'

'No, absolutely not!' Bernice shouted.

She blinked, and shook her head. The two dressmakers were staring at her, rather taken aback, as were Dorothée and Keri.

'Well, I wouldn't have expected such prejudice from you,' the Pakhar murmured.

'I don't know what came over me,' Bernice whispered, rubbing her brow.

'I suppose I'm just tired. Do forgive me, ladies.' She put down her saucer decisively. 'Come on, let's see if we can get into those wonderful dresses of yours, shall we?'

And they did. Bernice took one look at herself in the mirror and suppressed an urge to sprint out of the shop. There was something horribly final about a wedding dress, especially when one was holding the bouquet. Maybe what Emily said about closure was true. Past this point there were no longer any adventures to be had, one's life had ceased, and all that was ahead was children and pleasing somebody else.

Help, she thought. I'm going to lunge for the luggage again.

She held the thought down, though, and went through with the whole business of measuring and making notes for adjustments. Finally, she and her two. . . *gulp*. . . bridesmaids, left the happy dressmakers to their work. The two old ladies made delighted promises of secrecy and circumspection, which, knowing them, they'd probably keep.

Keri said that she was going off to have another word with her cameraman, and Bernice was left alone with Dorothée, in their regular

clothes again, standing in the street.

‘So. . . ’ Benny began. ‘Have you met Mrs Hutchings yet?’

‘Long time ago, yeah. She asked me if I wanted to stay.’

‘Goodness. Why didn’t you?’

‘I dunno. I wanted to see the universe. I don’t think I made the wrong choice, but. . . It’s gonna be interesting, meeting her again.’

Benny knew when something had got under Dorothée’s skin. Maybe getting rid of it would help their other problem, too. ‘Shall we go together, then?’

Dorothée looked at her for a moment and then nodded. ‘Yeah.’

Peter sank back into his chair, looking at his hands. He and Emily had just been bellowing at their adopted daughter, and she back at them. The row had been, of course, about Chris Cwej, and it had ended with Ishtar dashing 50

upstairs, sobbing. This had all happened within minutes of Peter arriving home. ‘Oh my God.’ Peter looked across to Emily. ‘We’ve become our parents.’

Emily slowly nodded. ‘Why do we worry? She’s probably using enough protection to make love in a fusion reactor. I don’t know why I get all worked up about it, it’s just –’

‘I know.’ Peter got up and held his wife.

They were awkwardly sitting and standing like that when the doorbell rang.

Peter rubbed his back and straightened up, still full of heaviness from the fight.

He opened the door expecting to turn somebody away, or make small, quick excuses.

Instead of which, he found himself smiling all over his face.

Someone from the past was standing in the doorway, Bernice behind her.

‘Ace!’ Peter exclaimed. ‘Oh my God.’ He grabbed her by the hand, not

noticing that she was a little unwilling, and led her into the house. ‘Emily, look who’s here.’

Emily got up slowly from the table, and approached the new arrival, staring at her. Then she grabbed her and hugged her tightly.

Dorothée smiled at Bernice over Emily’s shoulder, half relieved and half embarrassed. She was aware that Emily had started crying. Dorothée had thought that all the tricks of time were just the way of things to her now, but Emily’s age, and her own, and the way that they’d both changed. . . this was why she had delayed coming back here.

Emily broke off the embrace, held Dorothée at arm’s length and looked at her. ‘How old are you?’ she asked.

‘Thirty-one.’ Dorothée felt some weight at the back of her throat herself.

‘Time travel. Don’t worry about it.’

‘It’s a lot not to worry about!’ Peter laughed, his hands stuffed into his pockets, nervous about physical contact as always. Dorothée noted the wrinkles that had curled his brow, and the flecks of grey in his beard. She wasn’t used to him with glasses, either. ‘When the Doctor introduced us to Benny, and told us about the wedding, we wondered if you’d be showing up.’

‘You’re older than my own. . . than Ishtar.’ Emily sat down again, laughing and shaking her head. ‘Of course you are. That’s right, at least. Oh dear. . .

How long are you staying? Oh, you must stay with us! Do you remember that Christmas?’

Bernice caught Dorothée’s eye and moved towards the door. She raised six fingers, then fluttered her hands to indicate the Black Swan.

Dorothée nodded, and turned back to the Hutchingses as Bernice slid out.

* * *

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As soon as Bernice closed the door, Ishtar landed with a scrunch on

the gravel beside her. The young woman rubbed some brick dust off her hands and glanced back up at her open bedroom window.

'Running away?' asked Bernice.

'Only for an hour or two. They're both mad, and I don't want to go back in there now that this Ace woman's around. They've spent most of my life telling me how wonderful she is. Freeze my head or what?'

'What,' said Benny, bemused.

'There's something you ought to know. About Jason. . . ' Ishtar began as they walked up the short driveway towards the gate. 'Chris says I ought not to tell you, but –'

'Tell me. Tell me right now.' Bernice grabbed the gate and held it shut, not willing to let Ishtar take another step until she'd heard what she had to say.

'OK.' Ish took a deep breath. 'But you're not going to like it. . . '

Keri stopped knocking on Kitai's door, took a step back from it and har-rumphed. For a moment she considered trying to kick the door down. She made herself calm down. No amount of weird holography could disguise the broken remnants of a door.

She was still standing there, wondering where her errant cameraman had got to, when Bernice ran up the stairs. 'Keri, help!'

'Oh, not again,' Keri sighed. 'What's he done this time?'

'That's entirely the question. But now I've got an idea that might stop us from having to go through with this whole wedding business. Listen. . . '

Keri listened to Bernice, and, as she did so, her whiskers started to sag.

At six o'clock precisely, Bernice poked her head around the door of the pub.

She'd spent the day wandering, working on the wedding list, and occasionally wondering why she was doing that, if Ishtar's suspicions were correct. The Black Swan was an old pub, horse brasses hanging on the wall beside paint-ings of Edwardian cricketers and rusted agricultural implements. There was something comforting about it.

She was surprised to encounter the Doctor on his way out. He grinned

at her and doffed the hat that he'd just plopped on his head. 'Dorothée's in the corner. I'm taking Annie out for dinner. Italian. Then an early night.'

'Really?' Bernice raised an eyebrow.

The Doctor frowned, missing her meaning completely. 'Busy day tomorrow.

More guests.'

'Ah, Doctor –' Benny wanted to say that, if tonight worked out as she both did and didn't hope it would, then there wouldn't be any wedding for the guests to attend. But she stopped. 'Nothing.'

52

The Doctor tapped his chin with a cluster of busy fingers. 'Don't let the locals know about the aliens, by the way.' He raised a finger to stop Bernice's confession. 'Apart from the dressmakers. They won't tell. This is a very delicate time for Earth. They're just getting used to the idea of not being alone.

Soon, they'll find out.'

Bernice bit her lip. 'All these guests must be against the rules, mustn't they?

I mean, aren't we already disrupting things?'

'By letting the Isley Brothers see the future? No.' The Doctor replaced his hat. 'They tell people who don't believe them, and they write some songs which they don't record. Time smooths small things like that out, provided I act in good faith.' He went to the door, and then turned, his face suddenly in shadow. 'Starting a human–Martian war at this point would not be good faith.

Bear that in mind.'

And then he was gone.

Bernice shivered, and wandered further into the pub.

Dorothée was sitting at an old round ash table, a pint of ESB in front of her.

'How long have you been here?' Benny asked.

‘About. . . ’ Dorothée indicated an inch or two of ale. ‘I spent most of the day with Emily and Peter. They got a bit emotional at one point, and called for Ishtar to come down and see me. Then they found out she wasn’t there and got even more emotional.’

‘I know, I saw her outside. She got out of your way.’

Dorothée nodded, looking tired. ‘Good for her. Anyway, while all this was going on, Emily had already asked the big question. The one that begs to be asked now that I’m on twenty-first-century Earth.’

‘What?’

‘The one about giving Mum a call.’

‘Oh.’ Benny solemnly stood up again, and fished for her purse. ‘Another one of those, then?’

Dorothée nodded. ‘Several.’

Jason, Chris and James the verger were propping up the bar at the Time In A Bottle, James having met the two lads in the high street and asked them if their souls were pure. As a group, they’d decided that this was a complex question, best settled over a jar.

Jason handed Chris his orange juice and the verger his half of Guinness.

Neither drink had diverted him from a full pint of the landlord’s own bitter.

‘What I don’t understand about women is –’

‘Just about everything?’ Chris asked.

Jason ignored him. ‘Their absolute conviction that they are right, that their rules are the ones by which civilization should be run, and that we, us poor 53

men, have been born to break just those rules.’ He glanced at the other two agitatedly. ‘Well? Isn’t that true?’

‘Don’t look at me, mate.’ James shrugged. ‘I’m a virgin.’

‘Oh you poor thing.’ Jason looked away, as if he’d just witnessed a terrible accident. ‘That’s awful.’

‘Nah. I just haven’t quite found a girl I want to marry.’ The verger sipped his half. ‘Ahh. Thankfully, there are other things in life.’

Jason wiped the first foam of his beer from his lips. ‘Yes, but none of them are half as fun. Trust the word of a man who’s been at the wrong end of a great many alien orifices.’

Chris raised an eyebrow at Jason. ‘A man who is, ah, getting married next week. . . ’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Sorry, but I’m going to have to get going.

I told Roz I’d meet her tonight. We haven’t seen much of each other lately.’

The verger threw back his Guinness and drained the glass in a very unec-clesiastical fashion. ‘Me too. A church doesn’t look after itself. Well, OK, ours does, but it likes to have a bit of company. I’m sure we’ll get a chance to talk before the wedding, Jason.’ He headed for the door. Chris followed him, giving Jason a look that said ‘cheer up’.

Jason turned back to the bar, and raised his eyebrows at Mr Miller the landlord. ‘It seems as if it’s just you and me.’

The landlord looked over Jason’s shoulder and grunted.

Jason turned and saw Ishtar, leaning in the doorway of the pub and looking at him. Looking at him in a way that he wasn’t used to. She wore a long T-shirt with no sign of what was underneath.

Jason straightened up to his full height and thought of the perfect opening line. ‘Hello, you. Fancy a pint?’

‘Number one. . . ’ Dorothée considered, swirling the remains of her second pint in the bottom of her glass. ‘Sabalom Glitz. On the floor of his spaceship. He spent the whole night chatting me up, and I thought it was about time I tried it. Bloody awful. Very painful. Two was Jan.’

‘Jan,’ Bernice said, placing her empty glass beside Dorothée’s and clinking it in a toast. ‘I think the old darling ought to be somewhere in my own small list, but he’d only be about half a number. Your round, by the way.’

‘Yeah.’ Dorothée got to her feet, counting on her fingers. ‘I’ll need a minute to work this out. From here it gets difficult. . . ’

The Doctor sat across a table from the Reverend Annie Trelaw,

contemplating a vegetarian calzone that was being served to him. The Reverend had already taken delivery of a carbonara, which she was eating with gusto.

54

The bistro was quite tiny really, at least by city standards, but the food was excellent, and the waiters chattered away to each other in what they assumed to be indecipherable Italian. When the one who had served him was out of range, the Doctor raised his glass of water to Annie and murmured: 'They think we're having an affair, and they think you're *sensuale*. Either that, or they've just taken delivery of a large consignment of melons. My translation is sometimes very wonky.'

Annie looked over her shoulder. 'Oh dear. What can I say to them? I can't have them thinking that.'

'Deny it and they'll think it's true.'

'I'll have to act all vicarish to one of them.' Annie sighed and chewed on a spool of spaghetti thoughtfully. 'Thanks for treating me to this, by the way.

Saving the universe all the time can't be very lucrative.'

'There are untold riches in the TARDIS,' the Doctor told her. 'Whole rooms full of treasure and cat toys. Some of it's given to me by grateful civilizations.

If they've got too much money in their economy I take it. Some of it only someone with a TARDIS could get. I put it away for a rainy day, and never had one. So this wedding's my version of a monsoon. And a present. And a spring cleaning.' His face darkened. 'I wanted to ask about Ernest. I knew he died; I half wanted to be there. But I'd have caused a fuss. He'd have hated that. Can you tell me. . . what it was like?'

'Peaceful.' Annie stopped for a while, and toyed with her spaghetti. 'My father, Mike – Ernest's brother – was there, and so was I. The Hutchings family, too. They were very close to Uncle Ernest. He often wrote to me about them.'

The Doctor nodded, a little, distant smile on his face. 'What about Saul?'

‘He was there. He managed to reach out some distance from the church and. . . eased Uncle’s passing. I didn’t know about that then, of course. When Emily heard that I was attending theological college, she introduced me to Saul. He’d gone quiet, almost as if he was sleeping, since Ernest died. The replacement vicar they’d got in was fine, but didn’t have a feel for the place.

He had no idea about Saul – he wouldn’t even believe the church was haunted.

As soon as I could, I pulled a few strings with the Bishop – fabulous bloke –

and got slotted in. Saul started to perk up. We began to work together. He told me Ernest’s last words. Only he heard them.’

‘What were they?’

‘He said: “Fear makes companions of us all.”’

The Doctor closed his eyes. ‘Indeed.’

Roz was going for a walk. Not a patrol, or a beat. Just a walk. Which felt really weird. She could feel this leisure time sapping her strength, letting her 55

attention drift off and idle. If she stopped here much longer, she’d end up wanting to stay.

And would that be so bad? There wouldn’t be bloody weddings *all* the time.

She’d been walking down a muddy track, normally used by vehicles, the soil churned and solidified by the sun. In twilight, the natural shapes of it were beautiful, a sort of chaos you couldn’t easily find in the floating cities of home.

Against the mud, there was suddenly a square of orange. A piece of paper.

Roz bent down to pick it up, wanting to keep the art under her feet unsullied.

When she read what was on the paper, her expression changed.

She almost looked relieved.

‘Thirty-eight. . . ’ Dorothée mused, her eyes closed over her half empty glass,

‘Arnkush. A real Neanderthal.’

Bernice had her cheek resting on her palm. ‘I’ve known a few chaps like that.’

‘No, I mean a *real* Neanderthal. Third one I’d ever met, and I quite fancied the one from Mesopotamia, too. They’re really gentle and sweet. Thirty-nine. . . a dentist called Peter. I had a bad cavity in one of my incisors –’

‘And he gave you a filling.’ Benny drained her glass and glanced out of the window at the twilight, wondering what was happening with Jason, and if her plan was working out.

‘Forty, forty-one and forty-two. . . ’ Dorothée began.

Jason was staring into Ishtar’s eyes across the pub table. He’d bought her several diet beers. Ishtar was talking about how she’d like to run away to the stars with somebody fun and beautiful and strong. Jason had already established that she wasn’t necessarily talking about Cwej. He was fun to be with, but he was still so young. What Ishtar really wanted, it seemed, was somebody with a bit of experience, somebody who knew what they were about.

‘And, this person. . . ’ Jason waved a hand as if putting forward a hypothesis.

‘Would he be around my age?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’ Ishtar said earnestly. ‘With nice hands, good hair. . . ’

‘All stubbly?’

Ishtar shook her head, still keeping Jason’s deep-brown eyes locked on hers.

‘I don’t like men with rough chins.’

‘Oh.’ Jason moved his head back from hers, looking like a kicked puppy.

A smile curled Ishtar’s lip. ‘Usually.’

* * *

A sharp spring evening had settled over Cheldon Bonniface by the time Chris found Roz. She was sitting atop a tomb in the graveyard, cross-legged, pulling the petals off a flower.

'Hey!' Chris called. 'It's OK, I love you!'

'The last person that said that –' Roz looked up wearily, and paused for a moment, a wry smile coming to her face – 'meant it. What's up?'

'The town's jumping. I wanted to show you the nightlife.'

'I've seen the duckpond.'

'They've got a new mallard.' Chris hopped up on to the tomb beside Roz.

'But they have to share it with the next village. Hey' – he looked around – 'the Doctor told me that an old enemy of his is buried in this graveyard. Or his head is, anyway. Rupert something.'

'Sounds likely.' Roz didn't brighten.

'What're you doing?'

'Pulling petals off flowers, what's it look like? Getting a moon tan, too. I was thinking about a couple of things.'

'What, like deep, spiritual and emotional things?'

Roz pointed to herself. 'This is me we're talking about, Cwej.'

'Yeah, I forgot. So what's the mystery?'

'The mystery is. . . this.' Roz held up the tattered remains of an orange label, such as might be attached to a metal drum. 'I found this in a tractor treadmark down one of the lanes. It belongs to a barrel of Pragostimine, what we'd call Bloom.'

'Bloom?' Chris took the label and examined it, incredulous. 'The Kilbracken stuff? They had this back then? I mean, back now?'

'Yes, I checked. They don't really know what it can do yet. It was developed as a fertilizer in two thousand and two. But it's already illegal, under the First Reconstruction Act. And I don't mean illegal as in a farmer might sneak a couple of barrels on to his crops. I mean

illegal like viral weapons illegal.

You'd need one hell of a black market to get hold of this.'

'We should show it to the local police.'

'Of course. And he and his dog would mount an investigation. What bothers me is that I haven't seen any sign that this stuff is in use. No over-generous fields of perfect golden corn, no hyper-muscled bodybuilders.'

Cwej put an arm around her reluctant shoulders. 'You always find us trouble, don't you?'

'Yeah.' Roz threw away the stem of her flower and smiled. 'Fortunately.'

'And sixty-three was Count Nikolai Sorin!' Dorothée concluded proudly, bang-ing her glass down. 'And that's it. For the last year, anyway.'

57

Bernice shook her head in amazement. 'You make me feel as if I'm letting the side down.'

'No, no. . . ' Dorothée plucked up Benny's empty glass and stood up. 'It's good that you're going to settle down. I guess you know what you're doing.

And I like Jason – he's very attractive, right? Not that. . . oh forget it.' She sat back down again. 'You're good at this drunkenness bit, and I'm not.'

'Cheers.' Bernice had raised her finger at a couple of points that Dorothée had made in her ramble, but had decided to let them go, and couldn't really remember what they'd been anyway. 'Years of practice.'

'When I first travelled with the Doctor, I'd only been with Glitz, and I had this real teenage thing of getting a crush on every fit bloke I met. What I was trying to say was. . . ' She made a visible effort. 'I don't think you and Jason are like that.'

' *I* may not be,' Benny opined. 'But I think *he* is. I think I'll always be worrying about what he's up to.'

‘It’s because of my Mum that I can’t settle down. I keep thinking I’ll turn into her and it’ll all be awful. You think that realizing that’d let you get over it, wouldn’t you?’

Bernice made herself pay close attention. ‘You could say I want to settle down because I lost my parents. To lose one parent. . . no, never mind that.

We’re not just bloody bunches of responses, are we? We’re people, and we do strange things. To strange things.’ They clinked empty glasses. ‘You and Jan were going to be together, though, weren’t you?’

‘Yeah, but with the way his bunch lived, I could have had some of his mates as well, so you can’t claim mono. . . mono. . . you can’t say I was just gonna be with him, even though I loved him.’

‘So, about your Mum. . . ’ They’d forgotten about getting the drinks in for the moment, ignoring the way the pub had filled up, and the growing darkness outside.

‘I can still remember her phone number. I called her, last time I was in this town, and somebody picked up the phone. Dunno if it was her. She’d be. . .

really old.’

Benny drank from her glass, forgetting there was no beer left in it. ‘There’s a phone over there.’

Dorothée turned her head and looked at it. Then she got up, leaning on her chair for support. ‘Won’t be a minute, then.’

‘Good for you. More bitter?’

Dorothée glanced back, fishing in her pocket for change, and trying to figure out which of the coins she’d pulled out were appropriate. ‘I hope not.’

* * *

58

Jason and Ishtar were staring into each other’s eyes. ‘I do love these moments of edginess, don’t you?’ Jason said. ‘What’s going to happen next? What do we decide to do?’

‘Oh? What are the options?’ Ishtar’s pupils were nearly as big as her

eyes, which darted back and forth across Jason's face.

'Well, for a start there's this.' Jason took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Chris and Roz walked along the high street, a lot of the jauntiness missing from their stride. They'd been discussing strategies concerning finding the owner of the Bloom, and hadn't come up with a lot so far. 'List of local landowners,' Roz decided. 'Library tomorrow.'

They stopped outside the Time In A Bottle. 'Drink tonight?' Chris asked.

'Yeah.' Roz shrugged. 'OK.'

The rear entrance of the Black Swan opened on to Bridge Street, up which a very drunken Bernice and Dorothée were now staggering.

'So what did she say?' Bernice was asking the woman she was arm-in-arm with.

'She thought I was dead. Thought that for years.' Dorothée slapped a hand to her head. 'I don't believe I did that. I do not believe it.'

'Did you say where you were?'

'More than that. . . oh my God. . . ' Dorothée hopped a couple of times, and stopped, leaning against a low stone wall, to pull a stone from one of her trainers. 'I did that as well, didn't I?'

'What?'

'Invited her to your wedding.'

Bernice burst out laughing. 'You didn't!'

'Um-hm.' Dorothée staggered to her feet again. 'Look, it's the Time In A Bottle.'

'Yes. I wanted. . . to check up on my plan. But that stuff about your Mum. . .

well, that calls for a drink. Come on.'

The two women headed into the pub.

Jason and Ishtar were kissing passionately, holding on to each other

as well as they could across a pub table, much to the enjoyment of the locals.

The villagers all turned and looked, then, as Chris and Roz entered through the left door of the pub. They knew, as villagers always did, every detail of Chris's and Ishtar's courting.

Chris went to the bar, oblivious, and was about to order two pints of orange juice, when he realized that everybody was looking at him, and over his 59

shoulder, expectantly. 'Let me guess,' he said to the pub in general. 'There's a guy behind me with a gun, right?'

'Worse.' Roz tapped him on the shoulder, her mouth a weary line. 'Look.'

Chris turned, and saw Jason and Ishtar at their table, still locked in a passionate embrace.

He didn't have time to react before Dorothée and Bernice stumbled through the door opposite.

The heads of the villagers swung to them.

Benny and Dorothée stopped, astonished by the silence. 'We don't like strangers round 'ere. . . ' Dorothée muttered.

Bernice frowned, then slowly swung her gaze to follow the little twitching movements of Chris's nose, filled with a horrible certainty of what she was going to see. Yes, there they were. The plan, it seemed, had worked out all too well.

Quite calmly, she opened her mouth to say something witty. Unfortunately, for reasons that she could never quite explain, her words came out as a stran-gulated bellow. 'Jason!'

Jason and Ishtar looked up. And jumped back into their seats.

Bernice dived at Jason. She pulled him to his feet by his collar.

'You bastard!' she yelled at him.

And smacked him on the nose.

The locals applauded.

The impact sent Jason tumbling across the pub, to land in Chris's arms.

'Wait!' he cried. 'I can explain!'

Chris glanced at Roz. 'Shall I?'

She shrugged. 'Might as well.'

Chris nodded and struck Jason back the way he'd come. The villagers roared.

Dorothée grabbed Bernice, and stopped her from kicking her fiancé in the ribs. Benny twisted in her grasp, and bellowed at Ishtar, who was curled up in the corner of her seat, looking scared. 'You didn't have to go that far!'

'Sorry,' Ishtar squeaked. 'But you said –'

'I know what I said! I didn't think that I was going to turn out to be right!'

Bernice struggled out of Dorothée's arms and dived at the squealing figure, pulling her holo-pack off.

Ishtar vanished. Keri appeared. The villagers blinked. An old lady screamed.

'No!' Keri cried. 'Don't! They can see – *Choo*!'

The Pakhar sneezed.

* * *

60

The pub around Keri turned into a giant forest, full of walking, roaring, enormous trees, each leaf on their branches singing terrifying atonal poems to some malevolent deity. The trees closed in on the little Pakhar, their trunks opening into cavernous mouths, full of sharp, slavering teeth.

'The trees!' cried Keri. 'The trees are coming to get me!'

She leapt out of her seat, sprinted across the pub and out of the door, causing locals to jump out of her way, shouting and screaming.

She narrowly missed Jason, who wandered into the bar from the street, his hands in his pockets. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘you all sound like you’re having a good –’

He stared at himself, the himself that Chris was holding by the lapels. ‘Time.’

The first Jason gulped in a deep, relieved breath, and took the opportunity to hit a control on his belt. He vanished, replaced by Kitai. Chris released him, looking apologetic.

The crowd screamed again.

Bernice shook her head furiously, as if to clear it. ‘So he. . . you. . . ’

Kitai was about to explain the whole situation, but then his snout started to itch. He huffed, and then sneezed.

His expression froze. He slapped a paw to his tiny mouth, staring all around him in terror.

Then he sped from the pub, with a little rodent scream.

The locals leapt out of his way, too, trying to get over the bar in their terror.

The opposite door crashed open, and in strode the local policeman, Sergeant Burk, his alsatian at his side. ‘All right,’ he bellowed. ‘We can hear you halfway to Tasham! What’s going on?’

‘There were two of him!’ the landlord cried, pointing at Jason. ‘Giant hamsters!’

Bernice grabbed hold of Jason, as if to protect him, as the policeman advanced.

The rugged old sergeant glared at Jason, and pointed at Bernice. ‘Do you know this woman?’

‘I. . . ’ Jason struggled to say it, and found that, yet again, he couldn’t. ‘I. . . ’

‘She’s his fiancée,’ Dorothée told him.

‘Then this is your future husband?’ the policeman asked Bernice.

‘No!’ Benny yelled in his face, so hard that he took a step back.

‘Absolutely not!’

Then she put a hand to her mouth, once more amazed by what she’d said.

Sergeant Burk had had enough. He grabbed Bernice and Jason by the collars. ‘Drunk and disorderly,’ he told the pub. ‘If they’re lucky.’ And he dragged them out of the door.

61

The customers of the Time In A Bottle watched them go. Then their questioning and terrified gaze turned back to Chris, Roz and Dorothée.

‘It’s all right,’ Dorothée burped. ‘The hamsters are just aliens. I’m from the past, these two and Bernice are from the future, and Jason has just come back from outer space.’

‘Great sense of humour.’ Chris grabbed Dorothée by one arm, Roz grabbed the other, and they lifted the protesting woman out of the pub.

62

The UNIT Family

In the haze of the morning, a gleaming green Bentley buzzed down the motor-way from London to Norwich, its electric motor barely audible to its occupants over the rush of the wind. They were all wrapped up against the chill. At the wheel was a stocky, tanned man in his early seventies. His hair had only traces of grey, and his hands, while scarred with the remains of melanomas, still looked muscular. ‘What do you think, Brig?’ he called to the back seat.

‘Isn’t she a beauty?’

‘Absolutely, John.’ A very old man, with a rug over his lap, was sitting in the back of the car, his wife, very much younger, looking worried at his side.

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart had seen better days, as he said himself. He was in his tenth decade, kept going by the glandular implants that the UN

military’s medical service provided. In the last few months, the Brigadier had started to dictate his memories on to an expert system.

He rather liked the thought of being around, in spirit at least, on the battlefields of the far future.

He'd seen action as recently as the late thousands, leading a full regiment of troops on the King's side in the blockade of Westminster Bridge. Not a shot fired, thankfully. His turn on top of a tank, megaphone in hand, had made him into a bit of a media icon after that, a symbol of the Dissolution. Charlie had even offered him a role in the Provisional Cabinet. Not his style. The Reconstruction had pleased him, especially when they kicked Charlie's representative out of Parliament again. Some sort of balance had been restored.

Alastair's life. . . bit of a score draw. Possibly a result. We'll see.

'I said, how are you doing, sir?' Mike Yates was leaning towards his ear.

'Oh, fine. Fine.' The Brigadier glanced up at Yates and smiled, noting the slight look of everyday alarm on Doris's face. 'Just thinking about Winnifred.

Pity she and Ancelyn couldn't come along. Another quest. More your line, Captain.'

'Absolutely, sir.' Mike Yates pressed the fedora hat that concealed his bald patch further down on to his head. It was in danger of being blown off by the force of the air. His long hair blew out behind it. 'By the way, Tom sends his regards. I've got some of our honey for you in the baggage.'

'Very kind,' said the Brigadier.

Doris looked between the three old soldiers and sighed. 'Will the Doctor mind, do you think, that we're all several days early for the wedding?'

63

'What, the Doc, stand on ceremony?' John Benton called back. 'Not him.

The invitation said just to show up. He probably wants our help moving tables.'

'And it's an excuse for a few days off work, for all of us,' Yates chipped in.

The Brigadier would have agreed, though work for him these days involved a video link to Geneva and a team of computer experts, but he'd become aware that another car had drawn level with theirs. An ancient yellow 2CV, with electric engine of course. An old man with a straggly red beard was waving frantically at him, leaning out of the driver's window. It took the old soldier a moment to realize who it was.

'Oh my God,' he muttered, appalled. 'Hamlet Macbeth.'

'Brigadier! Captain Yates!' the 2CV driver called in a deep Scottish brogue.

'We are on the same road, yet again. What a coincidence.'

'Coincidence?' Doris muttered. 'So Mr Macbeth doesn't know about the wedding?'

'Good morning, Hamlet,' Yates yelled. 'Haven't seen you since the crop circles conference.'

'Ah, but I have some better photos since then,' Macbeth called back. 'I do not know what your destination is, but if you chance upon the hamlet of Cheldon Bonniface, you will find the two of us at Mrs Higgins's guest-house. Good to see you again, especially, Mrs Lethbridge-Stewart. Adieu!'

He accelerated the little car away into the distance. A young woman, who had been sitting in the passenger seat of the 2CV, spun around as they passed and took a quick photo of the Bentley.

The Brigadier realized that he had raised his arm over his face out of pure instinct. He lowered it again. 'You. . . know that man?' he asked Yates.

'Of course, sir. Our paths cross from time to time. That girl with him is Ruby Duvall.'

'What, the journalist?' Benton asked. 'I read her column in the *Sunday Seeker*.'

'Have a look on Sunday, John,' the Brigadier advised. 'We'll probably be in it. That Duvall woman got so close to Broadsword last year that I had to persuade Tennant not to assassinate her. She's got an obsession with alien invasions. The idea of having the two of them on the doorstep. . . And by accident. . . '

‘So who is this guy?’ asked Benton.

‘Got thrown out of UNIT,’ the Brigadier muttered.

Yates coughed theatrically.

‘Oh, there is a difference, Captain Yates.’ The Brigadier pursed his lips into a familiar half-smile. ‘I know you. I wouldn’t trust Macbeth as far as the tuck wagon. What’s the man doing looking so young, anyhow?’

64

‘He claims he spent ten years missing time aboard a flying saucer.’

‘Well, I think he’s charming.’ Doris fished in her handbag and retrieved her book of crosswords. ‘And it’s a pity you three never met those particular aliens.’

The old soldiers chorused dismay and mock anger. ‘We’re not finished yet, Mrs Brig!’ John Benton called.

‘Shall we?’ asked Yates. And he began to sing. ‘Sergeant Benton, do not touch me. . . ’

The other two joined in with the song, causing many drivers to turn their heads as they continued on their way to Norwich.

The little police station at the edge of the village had two cells. Bernice and Jason each occupied one. They’d discovered, upon waking up, that they could shout to each other through the brickwork. The echoes from this form of communication didn’t do Bernice’s headache any good, but there were several things both of them wanted to know about the night before.

‘What the hell,’ Jason was yelling, ‘was all that about?’

Bernice leant back on the white brick wall, drinking water straight out of a pitcher. She had hazy memories of bits of last night, and little awful moments kept coming back to her. But the awful unease that Ishtar’s gossip had planted in her remained. ‘Just. . . A practical joke. I suppose. It’s hard to remember.

I suppose Kitai wanted to look like you to see who he could cop off with.

Foolish creature.’ Her tone changed to one of false offhandedness. ‘Where, erm, were you while Keri and Kitai were eating each other’s

faces, anyway?'

'I was walking in the woods,' Jason called, still sounding aggrieved. 'And thank God for that, because if I'd been in the village I might have ended up being punched, like poor old Kitai.'

'Poor old Kitai?! He –' Benny stopped. 'I punched him? I punched him. Oh dear.'

'An action that, together with shouting at our Sergeant Burk, was probably what got us arrested.'

'You were the one who couldn't get your brain in gear when asked if you knew me. I can understand how that could be a difficult question for you. . . '

‘And there’s the small matter of revealing Keri’s true appearance to around thirty villagers who, at a guess, haven’t had much experience with alien life forms.’

Bernice opened her mouth in an expression of horror. ‘I did that?’

‘Yes.’ The stern Scottish voice shut both of them up. The sight panel in the door of Bernice’s cell was drawn back, and the Doctor’s eyes appeared at it.

‘On the way here, I heard a lot about giant hamsters. From the postman, and the baker, and the newsagent. They’re invading. Or abducting people. Or 65

mutants escaped from a lab. Luckily the villagers don’t associate them with Keri and Kitai’s disguises, or we’d be going through that business of mobs with flaming torches. Why is it that you did exactly the thing that I asked you not to do?’ His tone was almost jolly, sincerely questioning what on earth had possessed Bernice. That was the worst thing about it.

‘I’m sorry, I was very drunk indeed.’

‘Oh, I thought that would have something to do with it.’ The Doctor’s fingers fluttered through the grill. ‘Here comes that policeman with the keys. I’ve promised that you won’t do it again. The disorderly bit, I mean.’

The doors were both unlocked. Jason came out of his cell, stretching. ‘Sorry, Doctor,’ he groaned. ‘Not my fault. I’ll keep an eye on her.’

Bernice shrugged his arm from her shoulder. ‘Don’t tempt me. I may decide to have grievous bodily harm taken into consideration.’

The policeman looked at the Doctor. ‘Young love, eh?’

The Doctor frowned at him. ‘So I’m told.’

‘Do you think I should do something about them?’ The Doctor, his hat doffed, wandered down the central space of St Christopher’s, tapping on the tiles with his umbrella.

‘About who?’ Saul chorused. Mid-morning sunlight was rainbowing across the aisles, reflecting off the golden-eagle lectern in spectra.

‘Bernice and Jason. It would be easy to meddle. Easy to. . . adjust

things.

I don't know anything about romance, about humans doing human things. I still think they're suited to each other. But what if I'm wrong? What if they're going to make each other miserable?' He paused. 'Regrets. I have a few, but then again. . . If I believed in having another go at things, I'd have been to Ernest's funeral by now.' He brightened for a second. 'And I would have led myself away from that Bucks Fizz concert.'

'You could use your TARDIS to go into the future and see if Bernice and Jason are happy.'

'And use that information to inform my actions?' The Doctor shook his head, angry at something distant. 'No, the powers of the universe would never allow it. That's against every law of time.'

'Well, then, I recommend that you do nothing,' Saul boomed. 'Humans will be humans, and we shall outlast them and be puzzled by them all the while.'

The Bentley's occupants had taken rooms at Mrs Higgins's guest-house, the Brigadier noting with a sardonic sigh the 2CV parked outside. Having learnt that the Doctor was also staying there, but that he wasn't in his room, they set off to explore the village. A cool breeze was blowing, and some of the cottages 66

had their windows open, the curtains rustling to and fro to the rhythm of the wind in the trees.

'They certainly picked their spot,' Doris remarked. 'What a lovely place to be married.'

'Hey, look, here they come!' Benton pointed across the green. 'Is that the lucky man?'

Bernice and Jason had been just on the verge of a really big row, he wanting increasingly to know why she was being so offhand and distant, she not wanting to give voice to her suspicions. The arrival of more of Benny's friends made Jason curl in on himself, folding his arms across his chest.

'Bernice!' Mike called, running over to give her a hug. 'My God, I've got so much older than you have! Is this him?'

Jason unfolded his arms with a sigh, and shook Mike by the hand.

‘Jason Kane. Indeed.’

Benton strode up and ruffled Benny’s hair. ‘You’ve done well here, Jason.

She’s a real dolly bird, and she can sing.’

The whole group of them looked back to where the Brigadier was standing by Doris. He was looking strangely preoccupied, as if he was grappling with some great problem. A problem that he didn’t quite want to look as if he was addressing at all. Seeing that some response was required, he stepped stiffly forward, and shook Jason’s hand.

‘Good to see you again. Good man. Always thought you’d marry well.’

Jason shook his hand slowly, exchanging glances with Bernice. ‘Ah. . . I suppose that we must meet in the future, since we haven’t met yet.’

‘What?’ The Brigadier stopped, and slowly blinked. ‘Problem with time travel and all that. . . Yes, that’s it entirely. We meet in your future.’

Doris quickly stepped between them, a look of quiet anger on her face.

‘That’s not it at all, it’s just that Alastair –’

‘Doris!’ the Brigadier hissed. ‘You will not embarrass me in front of my men!’

‘They aren’t your men any more, and I’m only saving you from embarrassing yourself,’ she snapped back, very much in charge. She turned to the others.

‘Alastair has small lapses of memory. He doesn’t remember who either of you are, Miss. . . ’

‘Summerfield,’ Bernice murmured, trying to meet the old soldier’s gaze.

‘So he guessed that your fiancé must be the Doctor’s companion. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘Apparently,’ the Brigadier said crisply, his face set in an expression of unconcern. He visibly raised himself to his full height. ‘Off for a stroll. See you 67

all anon. Miss Summerfield. . . ’ He made a small, half-formed gesture

in lieu of Jason's name and hobbled off, a little too fast.

'Oh no,' Jason said, watching him go. 'I should have just gone along with it.'Benton shook his head. 'No,' Doris said firmly. 'If you start doing that, he really has lost his dignity, and I won't allow that to happen. Understood?'

'Understood,' said Benny, hugging herself.

Chris and Roz had been in the Time In A Bottle for ten minutes, Chris persuading Roz that the Bloom label was a matter for the local authorities, and not a mystery that they needed, or even ought, to solve.

'Let's face it, there are no victims, no visible effects, and no clues. It's a farming thing, Roz. You're really –' he grinned – 'scraping the bottom of the barrel for a mystery.'

Roz thought for a moment and then nodded grimly. 'I suppose so. It is a bit. . . petty, I suppose.' Her eyes returned to the distance they'd been staring into since she got to Cheldon Bonniface. When a fuming Benny stamped in and sat down, she didn't mention the label to her. The Doctor was at the bar, buying himself and Benny a drink.

Benny grabbed Chris's forearms and asked him: 'Big shirt?'

'Baboon,' Chris agreed. 'No doubt about it.'

'Damn.' She related how Jason had wandered off after their encounter with the UNIT crowd, looking sulky. The basic thrust of her account was that he didn't have any right to sulk, since he was the one under suspicion of gross adultery.

Roz quickly tired of the conversation, and smiled a dry smile when the Doctor sat down with his cup of tea.

'Good to have Mike and Mr Benton here,' he murmured. 'But I do wish the Brigadier hadn't wandered off before I had a chance to say hello.'

'He's probably with Jason,' Bernice muttered venomously. 'He fits the pattern. He moves.' She took a lip-trembling sip from her pint.

Hamlet and Ruby arrived at the pub a few minutes later. Ruby sighed as Macbeth did his usual bit with the tape recorder. Wherever they went, he would whip the device out and ask the same old question.

‘So, my dear man’ – she mouthed it as he said it – ‘have you ever seen anything unusual?’

This time, however, the reaction was different from the usual baffled glare.

Mr Miller looked at Macbeth as if he’d been asked whether he sold beer.

‘That depends,’ he replied with some evident restraint, ‘on what you’d call 68

unusual.’ He inclined his head slyly in the direction of a corner booth.

Macbeth, his nose twitching like a bloodhound’s, followed his gaze.

A moment before, the Doctor had seen who was at the bar. It had taken him a moment to register it. Then he tapped Bernice’s hand. As one, the two of them instantly sank beneath table level.

Roz and Chris looked at each other, and then at the approaching figures.

Roz’s hand went to her wristband. ‘Is this someone we should know about?’

she whispered with a careful offhandedness, not looking down at the Doctor.

‘Just somebody we didn’t really want to see!’ Bernice hissed, trying not to talk to Roz’s lap. ‘He’s called Hamlet Macbeth. He kidnapped the Doctor and tortured him.’

‘Good of you to invite him, in the circumstances.’ pondered Roz.

‘I didn’t invite him.’ The Doctor popped open his umbrella and covered the hiding place under the table from public gaze. ‘It’s a coincidence. Or would be, if there were such things. The woman with him is Ruby Duvall, who’s nice, but she’s fallen into bad company.’

‘Not like us to hide, though, eh?’ Benny nudged him. ‘You should be confronting him, not hiding.’

‘I’m not afraid of him.’ The Doctor grinned, as if struck by the absurdity of the thought. ‘But he’s a journalist now. He writes books about UFOs. Good ones. Put him here in the middle of all these aliens, add a suspicious humanity, right on the verge of true contact, add the

Brigadier. . . All those things together make a cocktail that could go boom and shatter history as a high note wrecks a metaphor. If he sees us here, he'll know that something's up.'

'Shh,' Chris advised from the table top. 'Here they come.'

Ruby felt a certain familiar weight descending on to her shoulders. This is what Hamlet got for interrogating people, even when he was supposed to be on holiday.

In the booth in front of them were a black woman and a white man with a golden tan.

'Excuse me,' Ruby began. 'Ruby Duvall, *Sunday Seeker*. Have you seen anything. . . strange recently?'

'Strange?' Roz replied. 'What do you mean by strange?'

'People changing their shape, time travel,' Hamlet muttered in his Scottish burr.

'Time travel?' Roz laughed.

'People changing their shape?' Chris laughed. 'Hey, no, you've got the wrong people here.'

Hamlet Macbeth narrowed his eyes at them.



Ruby gently eased him away. 'Sorry to bother you.'

'No problem,' Chris called. 'Any time.'

The Brigadier had wandered off into the woods, letting the quiet of the trees and the dappled shadows comfort him. Terrible thing to do, to snap at one's wife. Something else he'd started to do only recently. There was no excuse for it. It was just another thing about getting old. One woke in the night, having fought off that final blow in one's dreams, and was somehow frustrated by facing nothing in the darkness. So one hobbled out of bed and got a single measure of whisky, whatever the medic said, and sat up with the *Mumonkan* on one's lap.

He leant heavily on a tree as the pain came for a moment, swelled and then went away. His teacher had said that one was reborn as one deserved, as another human or a lower creature. If one was truly

enlightened, then one escaped the cycle of birth and death altogether. The Brigadier wouldn't do that. He was a soldier, after all. Lot of blood on these old hands. And worse, a soldier who shouted at his wife.

He dug his stick into the soil and set off again, his jaw shaking with anger at himself.

It was sometime later that he heard the humming. He'd been making his way along a little well-worn path, heading he didn't know where, when it penetrated his thoughts. An unearthly sound. The Brigadier, from his long experience, knew exactly what one of those was. Somewhere nearby, in the quiet of this sunlit wood, there was an inhuman power source, an alien technology.

He was surprised that he smiled as he slid instinctively behind a tree. It had occurred to the Brigadier, as a fancy, that he might vanish some starry night, off into space in some fantastical craft. He'd never quite achieved his dream of spaceflight, as a human astronaut, a representative of his species. Doris and Kate apart, to be taken away, to start a new adventure elsewhere. . . No.

That wasn't the nature of this dream. If he wanted to vanish one night, it was because he didn't want to be present at his own death. Because he wanted to avoid that moment of closure.

He sucked in a breath through his nostrils, and concentrated on the situation in hand. Slowly, marshalling his strength and trying not to rush, he stepped from tree to tree, turning his head from time to time to make the most of the hearing implant in his left ear. He was definitely getting nearer to the source of the sound.

He made his way to what turned out to be the edge of a clearing, and slowly peered out from behind a tree, wondering at what he would see.

70

In the clearing sat a craft. It rather resembled a missile, or an advanced fighter aircraft, but it had engines without exhausts, just large pods. The swept-back stubby wings had what appeared to be a tribal symbol on them, something that reminded Lethbridge-Stewart of his service in Africa. There was a cockpit, and, half in and half out of it, there was also a pilot. A young black woman, who was, rather incongruously, putting on a pair of summer sandals. They went well with the flowery frock that she wore, but clashed completely with the

gunbelt that hung over one shoulder. A ladder led from the cockpit down past a lethal-looking weapons package on the front of the craft.

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow. Then he stepped out of cover. 'Excuse me,' he called. 'Could I give you a hand with that ladder?'

She saw him, and snapped a gun from the belt, a movement too fast to follow. The belt landed on the ground. The Brigadier raised his hands, still smiling. 'I gather we're here for the same function. The Doctor? Or have I stumbled on an alien invader at a most inconvenient moment? Something of a coincidence. . . '

'The Doctor.' The young woman lowered the gun, and, before the Brigadier could even move, hopped down the ladder. She kicked the gunbelt into her hands and shoved the gun back into it. 'I thought I was early. The time controls are playing up.'

'Ten days early, to be precise. But you'll find that the gang's all here.' The Brigadier extended his hand. 'I'm Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart.'

She stared at him, frozen in the act of buckling the gunbelt around her waist. Then she started to laugh.

The Brigadier frowned. 'Have I missed something?'

'I doubt it, sir, I doubt it.' She shook his hand joyfully, looking him up and down. 'You were talking about coincidence? Well, I think the two of us just broke some kind of record.'

From out of the craft behind the woman rose a flattened ovoid. On its casing was a smiley-face graphic. The smile of the face opened in a grin. 'I see the resemblance. . . ' it purred.

She glanced over her shoulder. 'This is aM!xitsa – he's my companion.

Stealth mode please.'

The ovoid faded from view for a second, and an owl appeared in its place, blinking.

The Brigadier smiled at the owl. 'Delighted, but you haven't yet told me who you are, Miss. . . ?'

'Kadiatu,' Kadiatu told the Brigadier, taking the arm that was offered to her.

'And as for the rest of it, show me the way to this village, and prepare

yourself for a shock.'

* * *

71

A pitcher of lime juice, a pint of bitter and a small sherry sat on the table in the corner booth. The Doctor, having emerged from cover, had bought them and then wandered off, over to one of the pictures on the wall of the pub. He was staring at it thoughtfully while his companions pondered on the drinks he'd set in front of them. He detached the picture from its hook, flashing a brilliant grin to the landlord, and brought it over to the table. The silvered old photograph showed a group of men dressed in white, posing behind a small silver cup that was held in the hands of a handsome young man with blond hair.

Bernice tapped the photo. 'That's you, isn't it?'

'Serious bepple,' said Chris.

'Yes, it is me,' the Doctor told them. 'When I was younger. I stayed here for a summer. We won the local league. I've had a cricket match in mind. Us against the locals. It might calm things down after last night.'

'What's cricket?' asked Roz.

'Oh dear. . . ' Bernice laughed. 'I think that's in the top ten of the most dangerous questions in the universe, right up there with "Excuse me, Mr Dalek, what does that stick do?"'

'So it's decided,' the Doctor looked around happily. 'A friendly. Visitors against villagers!' He wandered back to the bar and explained his plan to Mr Miller. 'What do you think?'

The landlord considered the matter, and Bernice noticed something subtly change about his stance. The tiniest chink of amiability had entered into his expression. Talk of cricket was obviously not what he associated with gossip-ridden and scary strangers. 'If you can field a team, sir,' he said warily, 'we'll play them.'

'Thank you,' Bernice called to him. 'We're really not so bad, you know.'

The landlord looked as if the idea had never occurred to him. 'I'm still

wondering about what I saw last night, miss. Somebody explain that to me, and I'll be sweetness and light. We all will.'

The Doctor hastily pulled his watch from his jacket pocket and smiled in relief at its dial, stopping Benny's explanation in its tracks. 'Oh good, here come our guests.'

His friends turned to look at the door. Into the pub strode the Brigadier, his old weight supported by a young woman in a pretty dress and a gunbelt, with an owl perched on her shoulder.

The landlord's mouth creased slightly. The possibility of sweetness, let alone light, had, it seemed, receded once more.

The Brigadier saw the Doctor, and his face broke into a satisfied smile. 'Ah, there you are, Doctor. I gather you know my friend here.'

72

'Brigadier! Kadiatu!' The Doctor pumped their hands warmly, double-handed.

'Doctor, Cwej, Roz, Benny. . . ' Kadiatu counted heads, nodding to them and smiling. 'I guess that lime juice is for me. Very cool.' She hefted the pitcher with one hand and drained the whole vessel. 'Good for the biosystems.'

The Brigadier was gazing at the Doctor, his eyes gleaming like those of a man fifty years younger. 'I suppose you know, Doctor, but this woman is my great, great, great, granddaughter. In a manner of speaking. Isatu, dear Isatu, had my child and kept my name.' He let the words sink in for a moment, to himself as much as anybody else, then reached for his pint of bitter. 'Cheers everyone.'

'Macbeth, why can't you just relax?' Ruby asked. She was starting to enjoy the scenery of this little village. A big relief after the bustle of the city. When Hamlet had called her and asked her to come along on this jaunt, she'd been expecting a fun outing. She'd forgotten how obsessed he could be. They made their way to a bench on the other side of the green from the pub and sat down.

'Even if we do find something strange in this town, it'll probably turn out to have a perfectly rational explanation. Do you know the strength of the illegal scrumpy they make in this county? It's enough to make anybody hallucinate.'

‘There’s something we’re missing, Duvall, something about the situation that has passed us by,’ Hamlet rumbled. ‘I don’t expect you to follow the labyrinthine coils of deceit that the powers that be subject us poor researchers to.”I can’t say I do, Macbeth. I met some Cybermen, remember? Real aliens. A bit cut and dried compared to your adventures.’

‘Ah, but is that what they want you to think? Did you meet real Cybermen, or were they CIA agents encased in foil, bent on disinformation?’

Ruby sighed. ‘You see conspiracies everywhere. I could just do with a holiday.’

‘Mr Macbeth! Oh, Mr Macbeth!’

Hamlet Macbeth spun round, a look of stony Celtic wariness on his face.

It melted quickly into a gleeful smile. ‘Mrs Lethbridge-Stewart. I wondered when we would see you.’

Doris walked up to Hamlet and Ruby, holding on to her summer hat. ‘Oh, we’re all settled in now. You do look well, if I might say so. I haven’t seen you since the UNIT cheese-and-wine do five years ago. Oh dear.’ She bit her lip. ‘I hope I haven’t put my foot in it.’

‘Not at all, dear lady, not at all,’ Hamlet smiled. ‘The fact that your husband saw fit to eject me forcibly is of no consequence to our friendship. I had, after all, chosen to overlook the organization’s oversight in not inviting me, 73

and had made entrance underneath the barbed wire. Alastair at least had the courtesy to throw me out of a door.’

‘No hard feelings then.’ Doris glanced around the green. ‘You haven’t seen Alastair, have you?’

‘No, no,’ Hamlet rumbled. ‘When you find him, give him my regards, and, if you both, or simply yourself, would care for a light supper at some point. . . ’

He let the sentence trail off hopefully.

Doris chuckled and nodded. ‘I’ll let him know.’

Ruby nudged Hamlet in the ribs as they watched Doris head for the pub.

‘Terrible man.’

Hamlet raised an eyebrow. ‘What?’

Kadiatu was explaining the nature of her craft to Cwej and Forrester. ‘It’s actually more like a TARDIS than a spaceship, right? Way beyond anything that Zamper made, even. But I need something with fins and engines, or I don’t feel like I’m travelling. It’s in stealth mode now. Or should be. I set it to go invisible after I’d left.’

‘Wow,’ said Chris.

‘If you’re good,’ Roz told him, ‘she might take you for a ride in it later.’

‘I see.’ The Brigadier had been listening to the Doctor seriously for the last few minutes. ‘So you’re worried about the consequences of the wedding on Earth security?’

‘That’s one way to put it.’ The Doctor jumbled his fingers. ‘I’ve taken every precaution, but now that Hamlet Macbeth has arrived. . .

‘Let me put your mind at rest.’ The Brigadier emptied his glass, took it to the bar, and raised his voice to the landlord with military authority. ‘Telephone please, landlord.’ Mr Miller glumly handed him a handset. Without bothering to insert a coin, the Brigadier dialled an eight-digit number and got through immediately. ‘Major Gunther? Greyhound Leader here, John. Black authority, repeat black authority, top secret: clockwork. Subject area Cheldon Bonniface, give us a radius of, oh, twenty ks. Total news edit. Yes it is me, John. I know. . .

Thursday, isn’t it? In that case: Stilton Lymeswold Gloucester. Very good.’

He put the receiver down and turned back to the Doctor and his friends.

‘Duvall and Macbeth will find that, suddenly, nobody wants to buy their stories about this place.’ He took another pint from the tray of drinks that the Doctor had just bought. ‘Here’s to democracy, eh?’ His glance turned to Kadiatu. ‘And families.’

‘There you are, Alastair!’ called a familiar voice from the door. Doris

wandered in, blinking from the change from sunlight to darkness.

74

The Brigadier went over and took his wife by the hand. ‘Doris, about earlier –’

She shook her head, as if the whole thing were already forgotten. ‘We’ll talk about it later. I see you found the Doctor. Now, who are all these people?’

The Brigadier took a deep breath and indicated the lithe woman with the lime juice in her hand. ‘This is Kadiatu. We re. . . related.’

‘I think we just found out who the sherry is for,’ whispered Chris.

75

The Adventure of the

Curious Landowner,

Chapter One

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

In these journals concerning my friendship with that singular figure, the Great Detective Sherlock Holmes, with whom my readers are familiar, I have often declared the use of a certain licence, in the fields both of dramatic necessity and of national security. There are subjects, as I may have mentioned on previous occasions, for which the world is not yet prepared. It is with some trepidation, therefore, that I set down the story of how my inestimable friend and I actually *journeyed into the future*, and of what adventures we had there.

For not only will this manuscript not find its audience until many years after our deaths, but it also forms the sequel to an earlier journal of mine, the adventure I sought fit to title: The Mystery of the All-Consuming Fire.’ Those who find themselves baffled by it may take comfort in the certainty that the former account has been lost in the passage of time, though, of course, such a thought is of little comfort to me.

In the early autumn of 1887, I had seen little of Holmes for some time. He had ceased to summon me into his company, and I was engaged in matters which are not the concern of this journal. The outcome of

those matters, however, had left me tired and sick at heart, and, for one of the few times in my life, I actively sought out the company of my friend. I found him in one of those periodic hibernations or torpors, from which no stimulation could wake him, save that rare dish of a new case or a mystery on our doorstep. At least, that was how I took the situation: Holmes was slumped in his armchair when I entered his rooms at 221B, his hands idly sprawled over the arms, a dressing gown wrapped around him, and his eyes listlessly closed. He barely reacted as I entered, save for a tiny twitch of his upper lip. 'Ah, Watson. I gather that your ballerina has returned to Russia.'

I stopped, struck by that familiar feeling of astonishment at my friend's powers mixed with discomfort at having my private grief so intruded upon.

'Holmes, have you been spying on me?'

'Not at all, Watson, not at all.' He opened his eyes and sat upright, reaching 77

for the pot of tea that Mrs Hudson had placed before him, perhaps several minutes ago. 'You are wearing a new cologne, one that I do not normally associate with you, and it is so far from your common taste that I took it to be a present. You would not wear such a present unless it was from somebody important to you, and the fragrance, although' – he took in a troubled, sudden sniff – 'I cannot pinpoint it, is certainly Russian. The most notable Russians in town, and the only ladies, belong to the Lubakoff ballet company. You are here, uncalled for, which, though your presence is most certainly welcome, I take to mean that you have no better company to keep, and since the ballet returned to its homeland yesterday. . . ' He waved a hand, closing his eyes again as he sipped his tea. 'A trifle.'

I sat down, disquieted. It was most certainly not a trifle to me, but I did not wish to discuss the matter further. 'Have you no better case to occupy your mind?' I asked, admittedly rather bitter.

'Oh, there is one,' he said, surprising me. 'But it is a matter of waiting, without the possibility of much in the way of deduction, and you know how badly I wait. Look at this.'

He handed me a gilt-edged card, an elegant seal backing a careful and tiny hand. The card read:

Mr S. Holmes and Dr J.H. Watson

are invited to the wedding of

Prof. Bernice Surprise Summerfield and Mr Jason Kane to take place at

St. Christopher's church,

Cheldon Bonniface, Norfolk

at 2pm

on Saturday, 24th April, 2010.

Formal dress preferred.

RSVP

I must confess that the name of the lady on the card did nothing for my state of mind. But such astonishment was: I eclipsed as I read the date of the wedding. 'This must be the work of the Doctor,' I exclaimed. 'But how are we to reply?'

'That is the question,' Holmes replied. 'I have the strangest feeling, Watson, and you know I have no time for what others call the intuitive, that I have somehow replied already. As if the card knew of my intention and had reported it.'



'But what *is* our intention? Are we to attend?'

'Indeed, if you are willing. Imagine the opportunities. I shall be able to solve a dozen mysteries from my files simply by consulting a library. Those criminals whose deeds are discovered after their deaths, or who are caught through lengthy pursuit and elimination, may be caught now. We may even place ourselves so as to stop a crime or two in the act.'

'But what of the wedding itself? And the date? Have you no interest in the world of the future?'

'The future will occur, Watson, whatever we do. I can see no further interest in it save my immediate needs.'

It was at that point that we both became aware of a sound that I can only describe as the mechanical analogue to the death throes of some poor wretch, wracked by consumption. In the corner of Holmes's

rooms, something was forming out of mid-air, a shape I quickly recognized as that of the Doctor's miraculous time-travelling cabinet, its exterior decorated, as always, as some futuristic police apparatus.

Holmes and I stood up, Holmes adjusting the belt of his dressing gown in preparation for welcoming his guests. 'Mrs Hudson!' he bellowed. 'More tea, if you please!'

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** Watson, as always, looked like a sad little puppy when I stepped out of the TARDIS. He immediately took me by the hand and shook it heartily, looking terribly serious and nearly on the verge of tears. He told me that he was sure my fiancé was a wonderful man. I didn't have the heart to argue.

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

Professor Summerfield was looking radiant as always. She graciously took my hand and assured me that her fiancé was a gallant and noble man. I should like to say that any untoward affection which I had for this remarkable woman vanished immediately, but in truth I cannot. Holmes and the Doctor greeted each other congenially.

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** Holmes and the Doctor looked at each other like two cats staking out the boundaries of their territory. I made several rather witty jokes concerning Holmes's state of undress, which broke the ice and cheered everyone up.



**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

Clearly distracted by our fleeting touch, the Professor stumbled somewhat over the matter of Holmes's dressing gown, misjudging the situation entirely (especially since I was fully dressed). If I didn't have such admiration for the lady, I confess that I should have been most offended. Both Holmes and the Doctor stared at her in shock and amazement.

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** The Doctor explained to Holmes about the wedding, and warned him severely about interfering with the future. Apparently, Holmes had some idea in his head about trapping criminals by looking into historical records, but the Doctor explained about time rifts and things, and he reluctantly agreed not to do that. He went to get dressed and put

together a bag, and asked Watson if he was comfortable as he was. I told him that he could do without his heavy coat, and I swear he blushed.

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

Holmes advanced his theory concerning the apprehension of criminals by future means, and the Doctor was intrigued by it. However, he pointed out that there is a destiny at work within the universe, one with which Holmes dare not tamper, and the Great Detective gracefully assented.

Once Holmes had fetched a bag containing various essentials for an excur-sion (enough for us both, I was pleased to note), and had dressed, we entered the Doctor's time machine. Professor Summerfield took my arm on the threshold most discreetly, and we exchanged a momentary look of pure sympathy.

Oh, I thought, that another man should. . . But this is not the time for such speculation.

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** Watson didn't seem very keen on getting aboard the TARDIS, so I gave him a little shove. Nothing horrid, just an encouraging push. There's something about the buttoned-up neatness of him that makes me want to mess him up.

He looked at me as if I'd broken his train set.

The journey was a quick one, which was just as well, since we had to stop Holmes from deducing things all the way. He took one look at the console, and started to speculate about the Doctor's origins, home planet, all that stuff. The Doctor ran interference by offering him tea, scones, a full English breakfast, if 80

he'd only stop working out things that mankind is not meant to know.

All the while, Watson was looking at me and sighing.

That wasn't so bad, actually. I've always had a thing about older men. Well, not centuries-older men, but father figures and all that. I began to wonder if I did just want to mess up his tie, or if this was a full-scale steal-his-blazer-at-breaktime job.

Whatever, it is one thing to appreciate the shy glances of a Victorian bach-elor. It's quite another to stare openly at a friend's threepennies. So if you're reading this, Jason, don't you allow yourself even a

moment's satisfaction, all right?

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

We stepped out into the sunlight of a typical British summer's day, for which I was quite thankful. I had been dreading that the more lurid speculations of Mr Verne would have come true. But, even in 2010, it seemed that the eternal verities of steeple, cottage and barn were in place. The Doctor and the good Professor locked the door of their time machine behind us. I was about to make enquiry concerning the whereabouts of the lodgings the Doctor had booked for us, when I noticed that Holmes was stock-still, an expression of intense concentration on his face. He was staring at one of the nearby houses.

Finally, he broke his gaze with a sudden swipe of his hand, and turned to me, full of anger.

'Watson, this is intolerable!' He pointed to a dish-shaped object with a tiny central box, mounted by a bracket to the wall of the house that had caught his attention. 'I cannot fathom what that thing might be – the first object that catches my attention in this new century! If it is designed to hold rainwater, why is it on its side? If. . . . Why, this is that familiar disease, the one that the Doctor carries like a leper!'

The Doctor looked a little hurt at this. 'You mean that I stop you understanding things?'

'I mean that you uproot me from my natural habitat, and place me where I cannot understand anything. How am I supposed to function, to exist, when all my learning is as nothing?'

The dear Professor raised an eyebrow. 'You could just sit back and enjoy the wedding.'

Holmes considered the possibility for a moment. Then he smiled, as if acknowledging his apparent rudeness. 'Of course. Of course. Show us these lodgings, Doctor. I shall endeavour to enjoy the feeling of being a fish on the bank. At least you have taught me why I cannot abide angling!'

* * *

81

We were introduced to Mrs Higgins, our landlady, whose eyes were so wide that I suspected her to be on some form of medication. After the

Doctor and the dear Professor had departed, protesting that they were going to fetch more guests, she showed us to our rooms.

I was wondering why the Doctor had questioned me concerning my seldom-used offspinner. Perhaps I should be called upon to use it in the near future.

Holmes had no sooner dropped his case on to his bed than he was striding out of the door again. ‘I gather that even a small village such as this must have a library,’ he called. ‘You may find me there.’

I deposited my own baggage and rushed to follow him. ‘But Holmes,’ I protested, ‘you told the Doctor that you would not attempt to solve any crimes with future knowledge.’

‘And I am a man of my word, Watson. But if I am to. . . prosper, to exist at all in this future state, I must know the basics of it, at least. I intend to inform myself of enough to function as that which I am, a consulting detective.’

Bravely, I ventured the same opinion which I guessed Professor Summerfield held. ‘And if you were prevented from being that, what would you be then?’

He considered for a moment as he placed his top hat on his head and stepped out into the street. ‘Dead, my dear Watson. Then I should be dead.’

Shaking my head, I followed him down the street.

We had ascertained directions from a villager who was equally as wide-eyed as our landlady, and were passing the village pond, when my eyes chanced upon a dusky woman, her clothing utterly inappropriate for my own time, who was sitting on a bench, looking at something she held in one hand. There was a look of utter sadness and detachment on her face.

At second glance, I saw that she held some scrap of paper, which I took to be a note.

Holmes followed the direction of my gaze, and said: ‘She should realize that Professor Summerfield is not necessarily going to be so unlucky in love.’

‘What?’ To my horror, the young woman turned her head and looked at us, angrily. ‘I didn’t realize there were going to be any psis at this

wedding. If I'd known, I'd have worn a helmet, got it?' I think, or at least hope, that I have caught some flavour of her rather intriguing vernacular.

'My dear lady,' I ventured. 'Neither of us is known as Simon, and you have no need of a helmet. My friend Mr Holmes merely deduced your thoughts from your actions.'

I looked at Holmes, who was shaking his head and smiling. 'To see a lady injured in love is bad enough. To incur the wrath of an officer of the law, 82

and a friend of the Doctor's to boot, is doubly distressing.' He doffed his hat spectacularly. 'I am Sherlock Holmes, and I am at your service.'

The young woman's expression had changed from one of anger to one of excitement and, though I blush to say it, recognition. 'Sherlock Holmes?' she cried. 'There is a Goddess!'

'If that is also a deduction,' Holmes purred, 'then it is one beyond my powers.'

The woman stood and shook our hands, still looking overawed. 'And you must be Dr Watson. I'm Roz Forrester. And you two are the answer to my prayers.'

'Our fame extends beyond all reason, Watson,' Holmes remarked with a glance at me. 'Thanks to your journals, I suspect.' His whole bearing was intent now, his form utterly animated. He turned back to Miss Forrester. 'In what matter may I be of assistance? If it is an affair of the heart, then Watson is the authority rather than I.'

'What? Oh, no, this is evidence. I've found a mystery, and. . . Well, my partner's getting all romantic with one of the locals. He doesn't seem worried about it. And this might turn out to be trivial, but. . . well, I just can't let it rest.'

I glanced between her and Holmes. 'A fellow sufferer.'

The lady was still awestruck by the presence of the Great Detective. 'I'm not even going to ask how you knew I was an Adjudicator.'

Holmes waved a hand. 'A police officer, from whatever era, will always stand or sit in a familiar way. But you say you have a mystery?' Holmes straightened to his full height. 'Tell me every detail.

I think, Watson, that I may have found my entertainment.'

[ *To be continued.* ]

83

Bona Earth Reptiles

'So, what did you want to talk to me about?' Jason lowered himself into the itchy seat of three bales of last year's hay and looked at Dorothée. They had walked off into the fields until they'd found a barn in a deserted field.

Dorothée had insisted that they climb up into the loft and talk amongst the hay.

'I was just thinking. . . about Bernice, about what she wants out of life. She wants to marry you, right?'

'Allegedly,' Jason sighed.

'But she thinks that you're gonna chase everything with internal gonads.

She was very worried about this stuff the other night when we went out on the beer. So, I thought, never mind all this talk. All these promises. There's only one way that you can tell if a bloke's serious.'

'And what's that?'

Dorothée swung a knee over him, and flung her weight on to Jason's chest.

Then she kissed him solidly and passionately for ten seconds.

He just lay there, neutral. As if he was trying to ignore what she was doing.

Or, rather, trying to avoid having to do anything about it.

Then his hands started to make little jerking gestures, as if a thought had just come to him.

His eyes opened, and he tried to say something without biting her tongue off. 'Enfffurr fun.'

Dorothée relaxed and moved back an inch, licking her lips. 'What?'

Jason held her at arm's length for a moment. He seemed to choose his words carefully. 'You're not a hologram or a Pakhar or something, are you?'

'No,' Dorothée growled aggressively, daring him to make up his mind here.

'That was not an alien tongue in your mouth. This is the real thing you've got your hands on. I'm just the second girl you've met in ten years. That's what this decision you're about to make is about. Terrifying, eh?'

Jason raised a finger.

Then he stopped.

'Erm, excuse me for a minute. I'd just like to go to the toilet.'

As Jason hopped down from their perch and wandered around the back of the barn, Dorothée leant back against the straw and smiled to herself. She'd got a result. Maybe Jason had decided to hop off without having to explain 85

himself, but at least he was making a real effort not to be unfaithful to his fiancée. That'd cheer Benny up no end.

Sort of a pity, though. Since Sorin had packed his bags in the night, scared beyond all discussion by the woman he was living with – she still had his note in her bag – Dorothée hadn't been with anybody else. Jason had a kind of vulnerability about him, something that you wanted to comfort and share in at the same time. If he'd given in to her, then she could have taken him away and shown him several good timezones, and got a bit of healing herself. Still, it was all for the best, right? She prepared to jump down and wander back to the village.

At that moment, Jason came back round the corner of the barn.

He hopped up beside her, before she could say anything, and pulled her to him.

'What the hell!' he said.

Dorothée paused a moment, holding his lips away from hers. Then she nodded, a grim acceptance on her face, and let the kiss continue.

We make the places we land in. Sure we do.

Bernice was hugging herself, standing in the console room, watching the central column of the TARDIS rise and fall.

'Nice to see Holmes again,' the Doctor mused, tapping a control on the other side of the console with his umbrella. 'Even if he is a borderline psychotic with terrible manners.'

'Look who's talking.' Bernice shrugged off the sudden chill that had over-taken her and clapped her hands together. 'So, who are we fetching now?'

'I thought we'd finish off the musical side of things. A little band of my own choosing, and then some old friends of yours.'

'Danny? Oh, wonderful.'

Bernice didn't see the darkness pass over the Doctor's face for a moment. 'I thought you'd say that. But first. . . ' He operated the controls with his usual uneasy grace.

The sign on the door of the office, high up in the floating cities of thirtieth-century Earth, said simply: 'Bona Music'. The Doctor gestured to Bernice, who, feeling as though she was being set up for a magician's trick, knocked and entered. The Doctor strode in behind her, and closed the door, emitting, to Bernice's surprise, what sounded like a familiar call. 'Hello, is anybody there?'

Inside the outer office, beside the expected counter and customer seating, sat a piano, obviously a highly polished display model. At the instrument sat an Earth Reptile, its three-digit claws suspended over the keyboard, while 86

another Silurian leant beside him, its puckered mouth open, about to launch into a song.

The two reptiles froze at the sight of the Doctor and Bernice, and then leapt to their feet, brushing down their dinner suits. 'Hello,' the singer said, 'I'm Jacquilian and this is my friend Sanki. How can we be of assistance?'

Sanki nudged his friend hard. 'Why, it's the Doctor! It's been ages, hasn't it Jacquilian?'

'Ooh yes, and we haven't seen the Doctor in a while either.'

'How have you both been?' The Doctor shook them both by the claw.

‘Oh, we’ve been up to the higher levels, entertaining the Duke himself,’

Sanki told the Doctor proudly. ‘And that was good, but –’

‘No, tell him, Sanki, tell him.’

‘Jacs had an experience up there, didn’t you, Jacs?’

‘I had an experience right up there, Doctor. On the deck of the Duke’s personal dirigible. We were playing our *hag’jats* –’

‘That’s your actual Earth Reptile.’

‘When I glanced over the parapet, and I had such a nasty turn. My head was reeling, reeling it was. I couldn’t tell my lathes from my elbow. I fell over the side.’

‘Luckily, he managed to grab a rope.’

The Doctor looked concerned. ‘Were you dragged up on deck?’

The two Silurians looked at each other in puzzlement. ‘No,’ Sanki told him.

‘We were in evening dress. Anyhow, since that happened Jacs has lost all his glissando.’

Jacs nodded sadly. ‘So what was it we can do for you, Doctor? Musically, as you know, we are the foremost Earth Reptile performing duo in the whole Empire.’

‘Sans glissando,’ Sanki noted.

‘Well,’ the Doctor began. ‘This is my friend Bernice Summerfield. She’s getting married, and we were wondering if you’d play at the wedding.’

‘Ooh, a wedding!’ Jacquilian laid a claw gently on Bernice’s shoulder. ‘I shall compose a song specially, concerning the deep spiritual love between an omi and his palome, et cetera, et cetera.’

Bernice was immensely cheered to hear one of her favourite languages again. Palare, the underground tongue that had existed, in various forms, for thousands of years, was, basically, what her mates spoke. Making the mental leap that switched off the Doctor’s gift of tongues and allowed her actually to converse with somebody, she told Jacquilian what Jason was like, in a few, occasionally biting,

paragraphs.

The two Earth Reptiles were delighted, and clustered round her, making sympathetic noises and rolling their six eyes. ‘He didn’t!’ Sanki gasped at one 87

point. ‘I’d have niktayed his grollies for that.’

Bernice glanced across to the Doctor and smiled. ‘I think we talk the same language.’

‘I thought so,’ the Time Lord said, his eyes twinkling. ‘But are Bona Music prepared for a holiday in disguise?’

Sanki marched over to the door and flipped the sign that hung there to its

‘Closed’ position. ‘We are at your disposal.’

Anthony Christopher ‘Kit’ Chapin sat with his eyes closed, one finger raised in the air. In front of his desk sat the four long-haired, teenage-bearded members of a grunge band, listening as intently as Kit was to their demo tape.

One of them made to speak as a song clonked to a halt, but another hushed him.

Kit opened his eyes. ‘You can’t play, you can’t sing, your arrangements are awful. . . ’ he croaked in his whisky-stained north-London drawl. He cracked a smile. ‘You’ll go a long way. Now get out of my office, and say the words

“eight-album deal” to the nice lady in finance. Go on.’ He shooed the whooping would-be musicians out, and leant on the door behind them. ‘Bunch of tossers,’ he sighed. ‘Oh, we’re really sad and don’t know what to do. Bring back National Service, that’s what I say.’ He flicked the demo tape out of his office stereo and dropped *Uncertain Pleasures: Best of Plasticine 1976–1980*

into the CD tray. The familiar tones brought a smile to his stubble. ‘Now that. . . that was music.’

The intercom on his desk buzzed. He hit the button with the heel of his shoe as he flopped back into his chair. ‘Yeah?’

‘There’s somebody to see you sir,’ Kit’s secretary said. ‘She claims that

she was once in a band with you.'

Kit sat upright. 'What, tall, short hair, no tits, talks like Merchant bleeding Ivory?'

'Erm, I think that's her, sir.'

'Blimey, let her up.' Kit fumbled his comb out of his jacket pocket, simulta-neously licking his fingers to dab at the curry stain that had suddenly become very conspicuous on his waistcoat breast. He just had time to breathe into his palm, sniff his breath and wrinkle his nose before getting up to greet Bernice as she entered. 'Benny, long time no see. You don't look a day older.' He tried to hug her, but found that Bernice carefully diverted it into a handshake.

'Cheers, Kit. You do.'

'So,' Kit smiled artificially. 'What can I do you for? Hoping it's not a solo deal, 'cos I have to tell you, that punk snarl of yours, it's way out right now.'

He swiftly switched his stacking system off.



'Nothing so terrible,' Benny smiled. 'I was wondering if you knew where the rest of Plasticine were. I'm planning a reunion gig.'

'Oh yeah?' Kit licked his lips quickly. 'Well, I got a busy schedule these days, but I might well fit you in. What's the occasion?'

'My wedding reception.' Benny told him proudly. Then her face fell. 'Oh Kit, don't look so sad. . . '

After several phone calls, they heard word that Cob and Danny were living in a caravan on a patch of waste ground in Bristol. There was no way to contact them, so Kit got his first ride in the TARDIS.

He made the usual noises on getting in, and then pointed to the Doctor, with sudden certainty. 'I don't care if you can't sing a note. With this technology, you got a deal if you want it.'

The Doctor looked up from the console, his expression absolutely blank. It was that look he wore, Benny realized, when he saw something horrific across space and time, and it brooked no comedy. 'Sorry.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Last time I got involved in all that, I

was so upset by it all that I had to fake a motorcycle crash and hire an actor to play me.'

'He's joking, innee?' Kit asked.

Bernice nodded. 'Of course he is. Oh –' Her attention had turned to the interior door, from which two elegantly dressed young men in morning suits had emerged.

'Ooh,' one of them observed, glancing sidelong at Kit. 'Isn't he butch?'

Dorothée and Jason lay amongst a random pile of their clothes in the hay.

Dorothée was propped up on one elbow, looking down into the depths of Jason's eyes.

'No guilt, then?' she asked, inhaling the deeply engrossing scent of him again. 'None of this "you led me on" bit?'

'No.' Jason pursed his lips, looking hurt. 'I wanted you and you wanted me.

Does it have to be complicated?'

'Well, in the circumstances, right, yeah, it does. Do you still want to marry my mate, or do you want to hop back in time with me?'

'I. . . ' Jason sighed, and bit his lip. 'Can I have some time to think about it?'

'Yeah, you bastard,' Dorothée told him gently. 'You can have until you get to the altar. 'Cos then, if Benny doesn't know what's happened here already, I'm going to tell her. I'll make myself do that, 'cos I'd rather she was pissed off at me than lied to for the rest of her life. OK?'

'Oh,' Jason looked wounded. 'All right. Can I see you again in the meantime?'

Dorothée put her hand over her eyes. 'Oh my God. At least you're honest.'

* * *

What Dorothée and Jason didn't know was that, on the other side of the barn, her eyes wide open, sat Emily Hutchings. She'd been listening on this spring day, via the echo effect of the hot dark metal at her back, to the sounds of lovemaking. She'd originally settled in this spot, with her notepad on her knees, intending to write. *The Unformed Heart*, of course, the plot she always returned to when she was unhappy.

She'd considered moving immediately. She wasn't any kind of voyeur, and, considering that she'd realized the identities of the participants, part of her felt that she should go and tell Bernice or the Doctor or somebody.

But as she listened, watching a curlew lazily circle in the sky above a field of still-green shifting corn, she'd found herself wanting to hear these gasps and lappings and muscular movements to their end. They took her back to when she and Peter had been urgent with each other. Those gentle and frantic times in Peter's big brass bed. Before there were desperate and infertile times.

If only Ishtar could hear those.

There was nobody around for miles, just the corn and the curlew, the lovers and the writer.

So, as she heard Jason's breathing grow faster and then fade, she took the cap from her pen, and, glancing at the fields of corn, began to write.

90

Writing in the Sand

One afternoon, the Doctor went walking with the Brigadier in the forest. The Doctor kept his pace slow so that Lethbridge-Stewart could keep up. They talked about the guests who had already arrived, and told their stories about them. The Doctor suspected that the Brigadier had sensed he was uncomfortable around Danny, whom he had left to settle in at the guest-house in Bernice's company. The invitation to go for a walk was as acutely timed as any action the Brigadier had ever taken.

'Can't say I recognize him, either,' the old soldier muttered. 'But there is a strange sense of *déjà vu* surrounding both him and Miss Summerfield. Tell me, Doctor, is there anything I should know?'

The Doctor paused, flicking his hand at his chin. Finally, he decided. ‘Yes.

At the end of the Vardan invasion, I realized that you’d seen rather too much for a human mind to take. What with Artemis messing around in your brain, and the Vardans influencing you as well, I thought it best to allow you a time of healing.’

‘Oh, really?’ The Brigadier raised his eyebrows in alarm. ‘Well, Doctor, do I take it I have you to thank for the apparent onset of senility?’

The Doctor looked at him, his eyes stern. He knew his old friend far too well to lie to him.

The Brigadier looked away, took a moment to control himself, and then was calm again. ‘Well, even so, I’d like to know what it is I’ve missed. Soon as you like.’

‘All right.’ The Doctor stopped him and put a hand to his brow. ‘Remember.’

The Brigadier blinked. ‘Ah. . . ’ he said, a relieved smile spreading over his face. ‘Well, that makes so much more sense. Miss Summerfield, and Danny!

How could I forget?’

‘I’m sorry,’ the Doctor told him. ‘I thought I did the right thing.’

‘You did, and you just did it again. Let’s hear no more about it. At least now I can die with marbles intact.’

‘Die?’ The Doctor stopped walking. The syllable felt odd on his lips.

‘Yes. Soon, actually. Matter of weeks, the doctors say, but what do they know, eh?’ He glanced at the Doctor merrily. ‘I’m trying to stretch it to a year.

I have high hopes, now that I’ve met Kadiatu. Good to be here, actually, to see you all again. Best possible place.’



The Doctor looked at the ground and the trees. ‘How –?’

‘Oh, a lot of carcinogens were released during the last few years. I was in a lot of the wrong places.’ A wry smile formed on his lips. ‘Bloody

glad to have been, most of them.'

'Alastair. . . ' The Doctor flailed the air with his arms, despairing. 'I –'

'The only thing is,' the Brigadier interrupted him, 'it's hard on Doris and Kate, and Gordy. I expect you, Doctor, to make sure that they are safe for the remainder of their days. Do promise me that, won't you?'

His tone throughout had remained absolutely level.

The Doctor nodded, his eyes dark. 'I'll make sure.'

'Good.' The Brigadier gave him a clipped smile, as if the matter was dealt with. 'So, what are your plans after the wedding? As I recall, your young ladies generally leave your company once they're married. Miss Grant, for example. Will your loss be Earth's gain?'

The Doctor was staring at him, floundering, still flattened by his friend's courage. 'I. . . I don't know. This has helped me decide.' He paused. 'Can I tell you something?'

'Of course.'

'I'm going to leave them here.' He smiled distantly, as if admitting it was a relief. 'Chris is in a relationship. As much as Bernice is. Roz can find a niche in the Reconstruction. Dorothée will look after them all for as long as she wants to stay. I want to make an ending. To put them somewhere safe.

They'd say that they want to go on travelling, but after what Bernice has gone through. . . ' His voice became a whisper. 'She was *tortured*, Alastair.'

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow. 'Bastards. You killed some of them, I trust?'

'Don't ask questions like that. She's suffered. They've *all* suffered. . . too much. I've been wondering if Bernice and Jason will live happily ever after.

There's no way I can find out. But if they stay here, they'll have a better chance than if they travel with me. Without them, I can go back to setting right some of the things that need doing. My cat and I.'

Alastair took a deep breath. 'As you wish. I won't tell them. One might ask, however, how you expect to get by without somebody to impress

all the time.'

'I'll have to impress myself.'

'Careful, Doctor.' The Brigadier smiled. 'That is a challenge.'

92

Cut to the Chase

Danny threw back the thin glass pipe containing the yard of ale, his body set in a dramatic pose. The crowd around him in the Time In A Bottle swept in a great breath, willing him on as the brown liquid glugged down the pipe.

Danny bent further and further back, his eyes widening with the effort of it, and his nostrils flaring.

Dorothée was at his shoulder, looking up along the length of the pipe. 'Go on, mate!' she called. 'You can do it!'

Bernice followed the level of the alcohol down the tube with her finger. 'I actually think that this is more beer than I've ever put down at one time. Even when I had that intravenous drip.'

Jason was standing at the end of the bar, his hands on his hips. 'Barman,'

he called. 'Two of what he's having!'

'You will not!' Benny glared at him for being charming. It was at times like this that she had to make herself remember her current distrust.

Jason shrugged. 'What can I say? I could win, but she won't let me.'

'You're ruining your health.' Chris Cwej, Ishtar on his arm, was shaking his head in mock horror. 'Now, a yard of orange juice. . . '

'Would make you throw up.' Roz was on her way over to a corner booth, carrying a cup of tea for Holmes, who was flipping through a pile of magazines at a frantic pace. Watson was leaning by the fireplace, watching the yard-of-ale competition happily.

Cob and Kit were busy throwing tenner coins, mostly Kit's, on to the bar beside the barman. Kit glanced at Danny's progress, now halted for a moment as Danny breathed in through his nose, and tried to scrabble a few of the coins back. 'Nah, on second thoughts, this is too

rich a game for me,' he muttered.

'Have faith,' Cob told him, 'I've seen Danny do this before.'

With a final upward sweep of the pipe, Danny sucked the remaining ale down. He swung the tube away triumphantly and bowed to the crowd. 'There we are, landlord!' he called. 'Drinks on the house for all of 'em!'

Miss Kusinitz and Miss Gjovaag hurried forward to the bar. 'Two sweet sherries please,' Laura told the dour-looking barman. 'You did very well, Mr Paripski.'

'Old trick, ladies,' Danny said, swaying slightly. 'Breathing through my ears.'

93

'You must be popular with the girls.' Dorothée put an arm around his waist, supporting him.

'Lots of kids to show for it. Helen told me to be back soon; she's got a real handful there.'

Bernice propped up his other arm, smiling at Dorothée, and noting for a second that the smile her friend returned was uneasy. She wanted to say something to all these wonderful people, who had distracted her, ironically, from the questions she was pondering concerning the wedding that they were all supposedly here to attend. 'Thank you, all, for coming.' She waved her glass in the direction of Mr Miller. 'And thanks to our host, who's put up with so much. May the best team win when we do this cricket thing.'

The landlord raised an eyebrow. 'Thank you, miss. I'm as happy as any man who just made a loss on a whole night's business.'

'I wouldn't bet on that,' Benny told him. 'You haven't seen this lot drink.'

'I'm Jacquilian and this is my friend Sanki.' The two disguised Silurians, looking like two handsome young men from a thirties romantic comedy, were introducing themselves to two of the Isley Brothers.

'Space names!' Ronald cried. 'See, I told you somebody'd have a space name!'

‘Ooh, no, we’ve never been into space,’ Sanki told him. ‘Jacs has a thing about zero gravity. All that floating about.’

‘Yes, I like to know where my organs have got to,’ Jacquilian agreed.

O’Kelly was talking to Kadiatu, as he had been all evening. ‘So, pretty lady,’

he said, leaning against the wall beside her, ‘you’re everything I respect and care for in a woman. Would you do me the honour of dining with me, maybe sharing some fine wine?’

‘You’re talking about sexual reproduction?’ Kadiatu said. ‘Well, we could, but I don’t think you’d survive the experience.’

O’Kelly took a deep breath. ‘I’m brave that way.’

The Doctor, the Brigadier and Doris were sitting in a corner booth with the disguised Keri and Kitai, looking serious.

‘And every time I sneeze, it happens,’ Keri was saying. ‘I don’t know what’s causing it. It’s happening to Kitai, too, yeah?’

Kitai nodded.

The Doctor smiled in puzzlement. ‘It might be an allergic reaction of some kind. The pollen on this planet must be having a psychedelic effect on your brains.’

‘Good lord,’ the Brigadier muttered. ‘I’ve heard of hay fever, Doctor, but –’



‘Can we expect lots of Pakhar hippies to land?’ Doris asked gaily. She glanced over her shoulder and returned a little wave to Hamlet Macbeth, eliciting a glare from the Brigadier. The reporter, together with Ruby Duvall, had wandered into the pub a moment ago, causing the Doctor, Bernice and Dorothée to hide in dark corners of the crowded inn.

‘Pakhars don’t enjoy intoxication,’ Keri told them. ‘Well, not often, anyway, yeah? Isn’t there anything you can do to help, Doctor?’

‘I’ll work on something. The question is, will you be able to play in the cricket match?’

‘Hah, she should be good at it!’ The Brigadier coughed. ‘Keri Pakhar! Eh?

Oh, never mind, before your time. . . ’

As the Doctor leant forward to discuss a chemical solution to the Pakhars’

problem in more detail, Doris whispered in the Brigadier’s ear. ‘Alastair, what’s wrong?’

The Brigadier pursed his lips, and whispered curtly back. ‘Macbeth. I know I’m shortly not going to be here. And I know you’re a great deal younger, but, even so –’

‘Alastair, don’t be absurd!’ Doris hissed. ‘I love you, you stupid man, and I shall love you even when. . . when. . . ’ She got up and ran off towards the door.

The Brigadier tried to stand quickly, and could not.

He settled back in his seat, and set his jaw.

Benton and Yates wandered over from the bar, clutching their pints. ‘Mike’s been telling me about what the Americans have been getting up to with the spacecraft they’ve captured,’ an enthralled Benton told the Brigadier. ‘How much did we know about all that, sir?’

‘Everything and nothing, John.’ The old soldier made himself smile. ‘I’m surprised at you, Captain Yates. We weren’t above a few dirty tricks of our own, you know.’

‘Affirmative, sir. And talking of which’ – Yates indicated Jacquilian and Sanki

– ‘you’re not going to believe who those two are. . . ’

In the street outside the pub, James the verger looked up into the darkening evening sky, and saw that a storm was brewing. The cobbles at his feet started to darken and patter with rain. He grabbed the two gigantic wreaths he was carrying, and ran for the lights of the inn.

In their sitting room, Peter and Emily Hutchings sat watching television. Emily was attending to her notes, frantically crossing out and rewriting things, engaged so much by her story that she’d

completely ignored the news that ought to have sent her straight to Benny.

95

The TV picture started to jump and break up as distant lightning approached the town. The first roll of thunder sounded outside.

‘Oh dear,’ muttered Peter, looking up from his paper. ‘Storm on the way.’

James burst in through the door of the Time In A Bottle, shaking water from his shoulders with a grimace.

Shaking pollen from the flowers in the wreaths he carried.

A great crash shook the building as lightning struck nearby, and the drinkers cheered, trying to match the noise.

‘Evening, everybody,’ James called over the din. ‘I –’

‘ *Choo*!’ Keri and Kitai sneezed together.

‘Have come to eat you!’ James roared at them, skidding up to their table on his knees and shaking the wreaths in their faces.

The Pakhars screamed and hugged each other.

‘We’ll eat you first!’ yelled Keri, waving her little fist at the slavering verger, who was now crawling across the pub table towards them. ‘The fleets of Pakhar will reduce this world to ashes! *Choo*!’

She realized that she was standing up, in front of a whole crowd of silent customers, brandishing her fist in the air. James still stood by the door, looking at her in astonishment.

‘And another thing!’ Kitai cried, to Keri’s horror, his eyes still staring and tearful with pollen. ‘Our glorious space troopers will burn every flower and every field on this pitiful dustball you dare to refer to as a world! We will free the oppressed creatures you call gerbils, and steal all of your straw!’

‘It’s a play we’re rehearsing.’ Keri shrugged to the staring villagers, her holographic form adopting a sheepish grin. ‘Dramatic, yeah?’

Hamlet Macbeth clapped. ‘Bravo!’

With a tremendous explosion, a bolt of lightning connected itself to the satellite dish on the roof of the pub.

Or, rather, as careful eyes would have noted in the momentary flash, to a strangely shaped piece of metal connected to the satellite dish on the roof of the pub.

All the lights went out.

There was a collective gasp, then silence, broken only by Kitai's continued ranting. 'Our troops will impregnate your dairy animals, and laugh at your human dress sense! They will flood your rivers with the discarded shells of their nut rations!'

'I say,' said the intrigued voice of Hamlet Macbeth. 'What does he mean?'

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There was a discreet, but loud 'bop' sound, like an umbrella hitting something soft. Then a thud.

'Wait a moment, everybody, I'll just find the solar battery,' the landlord called. A moment later, there came the thud of a lever behind the bar, and all the lights flickered back on.

Revealing two Pakhars and two Silurians, undisguised amongst the patrons of the Time In A Bottle.

Barmaids screamed. The landlord grabbed Hamlet Macbeth's shoulder and pointed at the Pakhars. 'That's them! That's the ones who've come to invade us!''No, wait –' Keri put up her paws and considered, for a second, attempting to talk rationally to the terrified mob of villagers who surrounded the two of them.

The Doctor's various comrades in the pub would doubtless have been about to start explaining things and calming everything down.

The Doctor jumped to his feet.

Hamlet Macbeth saw him, opened his mouth and pointed wildly to the four aliens. 'It's him! Grab them! Don't let them get away!'

Ruby slapped his arm aside in that moment. 'Hamlet, that's the Doctor, don't be –'

But it was too late.

Villagers turned over tables and cast aside chairs, attempting to lay hands on Keri, Kitai, Jacquilian and Sanki. The pub erupted with noise.

'Run, Jacs, run!' cried Sanki. The two Silurians, with the Pakhars hot on their heels, sprinted from the pub.

The braver villagers, snatching makeshift weapons from the walls, hurried swiftly after them, Macbeth at their head. 'Capture the aliens!' he cried. 'The safety of Earth is at stake!'

'No, stop!' roared the Doctor, in a voice louder than the storm. To no effect.

His face dark, he raced out of the door behind the villagers, followed by the mass of his companions and cohorts.

Sherlock Holmes looked up from his magazines, realized that the pub was almost empty and returned to his reading, making only a small, dismissive noise.

The Brigadier, the two dressmaking ladies and Ruby Duvall were the only other people left in the pub.

The Brigadier stood up, and hobbled over to the bar, where he poured himself a measure of Scotch. Miss Gjovaag and Miss Kusinitz rushed to the brandy.

'The Doctor!' Ruby Duvall was staring after the Time Lord. 'I never thought I'd. . . I'm really sorry.' She turned to the Brigadier. 'If the Doctor's involved in all this, then it must be OK, right?'



'Indeed.' The Brigadier poured a whisky for her and threw back his own.

'Hopefully.'

'We may be running now!' bellowed Kitai against the storm, one paw clutching the red lump on his head, 'but soon the glorious Pakhar army –'

Keri slapped him, even though she was running as fast as her little legs would carry her. She kept on slapping him as the two rodents rushed along the little backroad, so that, from a distance, they looked

like a small, high-speed, mobile, furry morris dance. Or something. 'You sticky hairball!' she was shouting at him. 'You sharp bundle of sticks! We aren't going to invade, you doped-up mass of three-day-old droppings, because, apart from anything else, *we don't have an army*!'

'Ow! Ow!' cried Kitai as he ran. But he showed no signs of sobering up, or whatever one does when one recovers from pollen.

The two Silurians were now hot on the Pakhars' heels, their big clawed feet making good speed along the cobbles. They kept glancing over their shoulders and squealing. 'Barbarians!' yelled Jacquilian at the mob behind them. 'You'd think it was the twenty-first century!'

'It *is* the twenty-first century!' Sanki told him. 'So let's not have any of that Earth Reptile Pride rubbish – let's just find a barn or something and hide!'

'There they are!' roared Hamlet, leading the mob of villagers, the landlord at his side. Some of the locals had even ignited sticks from the fires of the inn, and were waving them about their heads in the driving rain. 'Aliens! Aliens!'

'Burn them!' yelled Mr Cooke, a rather aptly named and over-enthusiastic baker who'd seen too many horror movies.

'Erm, no,' Hamlet told him. 'I was rather more thinking –'

But the crowd took up the chant. 'Burn them! Burn them!'

Behind the villagers ran the Doctor's party. 'What I wouldn't give for a few of the lads and some stun grenades,' Benton was muttering.

'Or a squad of Adjudicators with shock batons,' Roz added.

'Or just one big neural cannon,' Dorothée sighed.

'What, like this one?' A blunt metal nozzle extended from the forehead of the owl which was now flying, its wings perfectly still, above Kadiatu's shoulder.

'Yeah!' Dorothée said. 'Now –'

'No!' the Doctor growled. 'The more technology we use on the villagers now, the more we alienate them. We have to stop them, to rescue Keri and the others, to talk. I don't know what caused the disguises to fail, but –'

‘A burst of modulated energy,’ the owl told him. ‘I registered it.’

‘The lightning?’ Yates suggested.



‘Perhaps. No time for that now.’ The Doctor gestured to Dorothée, Kadiatu and Ishtar. ‘You three, go across the fields. Grab our friends near the graveyard and hide them.’ His concern turned into a scowl for a second. ‘Ace, don’t hurt anybody.’

‘I’ve missed him saying that,’ Dorothée grinned, as she and the other two hurdled the fence into a nearby field. They sprinted away into the darkness, racing each other around the curve of the village boundary.

The chase had turned, like a ragged and shouting snake, into the main street of the village, shop windows being lit up by the light of the torches as the villagers passed. The aliens at the front were tiny figures as they chose and took a particular side-road, Keri dragging the still-ranting Kitai behind her. The crowd roared after them, still chanting things about burning.

The Doctor pointed to a side-street and led his faction down it. ‘We’ll inter-cept the main march and stop them.’

‘Just like seventy-six all over again,’ Danny said.

‘Yeah, right, couldn’t we just call the coppers and let them sort it out?’ asked Kit. ‘Just a suggestion.’

The Doctor’s party broke out of the end of the sidestreet, and found themselves immediately between the aliens, who’d just dashed past, heading thankfully towards the churchyard, and the mob, who were approaching them at a run. The Doctor pointed at the mob, and planted his feet square in front of them in the middle of the road. ‘Bernice,’ he called. ‘Delay them.’

‘Me? Of course. Fine.’ Bernice dashed off up the road, towards the mob.

‘Busy day.’ Jason looked after her, alarmed, but the Doctor stopped him from following.

Benton rolled up his sleeves. ‘Stay back, the rest of you. I’ll take a few of them out.’

‘John, we’re old men; let the Doctor handle it.’ Yates glanced at Cob, who was pulling a modelling knife out of his boot, and snapped an order. ‘You there, put that away!’

Astonished, Cob did so.

‘Doctor,’ panted Watson. ‘Is it wise, sending Professor Summerfield to confront a raging mob?’

‘Oh yes.’ The Doctor concentrated on tearing the piece of paper he held in his hands. ‘I should think that most of them will come out of it unscathed.’

Bernice stopped halfway between the Doctor’s thin line of companions and the mob, and glanced over her shoulder. She turned back to the mob, and fell to her knees, her hands clutched together in supplication. ‘Help me!’ she cried piteously. ‘Somebody please help!’



The mob swept around her, and swirled, halted, parted, hands reaching down to help her up. There were a lot of questioning voices, some full of righteous indignation, some perplexed, some simply scared. A few of the villagers recognized her as one of the strangers who’d brought the monsters with them, and those voices were in favour of interrogating her, but her piteous act had most of the locals asking her what the matter was, and if the monsters had hurt her.

Hamlet Macbeth was fighting his way through all of them towards her, which meant that he wasn’t really in control of this lot any more.

OK.

‘You’re not going to believe what’s just happened to me!’ she wailed. ‘It’s extraordinary! It’s just completely incredible!’

The crowd, in all its voices, which were gradually turning from mainly angry into mainly interested, asked her what had happened, exactly.

‘Oh, it’s a long story –’

Bad idea. They wanted to hear, but they also wanted to burn the monsters.

They thought that this story was going to give them a better reason to do that.

‘But I can tell it very quickly. In twenty-five words or less.’ She grabbed Hamlet Macbeth, who had finally reached her, and threw her arm around his shoulders. ‘This is Mr Macbeth, the world-famous film producer, and you’re all extras in his latest movie! Look, there are the cameras!’ She pointed wildly in a randomly chosen direction.

Hamlet shook his head sadly. ‘There are those of us who are party to the alien menace –’

‘Alien menace!’ Bernice laughed. ‘Listen to him!’

‘You saw them with your own eyes!’ Hamlet roared, and the crowd roared with him.

Bernice thrust her head against his ear. ‘Get this lot home and we’ll tell you everything.’

‘No, no, I will not do that! Not when I’m so close! Forward!’ Hamlet bellowed, and, fired up once more, the crowd followed him.

Bernice found herself in the vicelike grip of the enthusiastic baker. ‘I’m from Cricklewood,’ she told him. ‘Not outer space.’

‘We’ll see,’ Mr Cooke told her. ‘Let’s see if those are masks the aliens are wearing.’

As Keri and Kitai, and then Jacquilian and Sanki, ran past the low wall of the churchyard, strong arms plucked them up and rolled them over it. They found themselves lying on the moist soil beside a grave, with Kadiatu, Dorothée and Ishtar squatting over them. All of the young women had their fingers to their lips.



Kadiatu’s owl flapped up to the wall and sat on it, keeping watch.

Ishtar glanced up at the church itself, dark against the rising moon, and nodded to some silent communication. ‘Yeah, right you are, Saul.’ She grabbed Sanki’s claw and lifted him to his feet. ‘Come on, let’s get ourselves some sanctuary.’

As the mob approached them again, the Doctor finished tearing his piece of paper. He flapped it open until it swirled out into a length of twisted paper cord. He handed one end to Danny, and quickly attached the other to a post on the fence opposite. Then he stepped back.

‘Stop!’ he called to the mob. ‘You can’t cross this line!’

‘You cannot stop us, Doctor!’ Hamlet cried back. Benny’s intervention, the Doctor realized, had given him control of the gang once more. That was something, at least. ‘The truth that I’ve searched for so long, what we all want to know, is down that lane.’

‘It’s too soon, Hamlet,’ the Doctor called back. ‘Humans aren’t ready for this.’

‘And who are you to say that?’ The mob had reached the paper line. ‘Forward!’

The mob ran at the line, and the Doctor ushered his forces aside.

The paper caught them across the chest, and then parted. The mob rushed down the lane towards the church.

‘What was the point of that?’ Cwej asked, aghast.

‘To send them into the church,’ the little Time Lord replied, looking satisfied.

‘Besides, it stopped Sergeant Benton hitting anybody. Jason, get Bernice.’

Bernice was towards the back of the group, struggling in the grasp of Mr Cooke, who was eager to get to the front of the crowd.

Jason ran up to them and pointed at the man. ‘Hey. Please put my fiancée down.’

‘Jason,’ Bernice growled. ‘I can handle this.’

‘What, her who sold us out to the aliens?’ the baker laughed, with typically confused logic. ‘No way. She’s got some questions to answer.’

‘Oh well.’ Jason shrugged. ‘Keep her then. Saves me having to marry her.’

‘What?’ Bernice bellowed. ‘Some rescue that was!’

‘Look, the gentleman wants to burn you at the stake. What can I do?’

‘You could punch him or something!’

‘Benny, Benny, violence solves nothing.’ Jason stepped forward, his

arms spread wide. The baker was looking between them in astonishment, wondering when he was going to be able to rejoin the mob, which had by now moved on.

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In fact, Chris Cwej and John Watson were now standing between him and the others. He looked between the three men who surrounded him.

Now four, including John Benton.

They all had their arms folded.

‘We are,’ Watson informed him, ‘all rather fond of that young lady. And you, as our host in this village, should show rather more manners.’

‘I could punch him,’ Jason mused. ‘Really, I think it’s time I tried this physical action thing. I might like it.’

‘Now, wait a minute.’ The baker glanced around him quickly. ‘It wasn’t as if I was going to hurt her.’

‘Of course not,’ Benny agreed. ‘The flames would have been purely medici-nal.’

Mr Cooke let her go, and tensed, expecting to be leapt upon by the men.

The Doctor stepped forward and made a little fluttering movement with his hand, as if releasing a pigeon. Benton and Watson stood aside, and the baker sprinted off towards the mob, which was now barging through the lych-gate of the church.

‘You don’t, by any chance, have a plan, do you?’ asked Bernice, brushing herself down and glowering at Jason.

The Doctor put a finger to his lips. ‘If one has a certain poise, a certain certainty, people tend to assume that one had the whole thing planned in advance.’

Chris Cwej laughed. ‘Nobody would ever think that about you, Doctor!’

Bernice and Benton exchanged glances. ‘New boy,’ they said.

The mass of variously-motivated villagers with Hamlet Macbeth as its nominal head streamed through the churchyard, becoming slightly less moblike as it tried not to step on any gravestones or anything. Macbeth found himself slammed against the door of the church. Imperiously, he raised his fist, and knocked.

The door immediately swung open, spoiling the effect.

From inside the church came the sound of beautiful song.

The mob, now less moblike than ever, stepped carefully over the threshold, removing various hats. Hamlet made an attempt to inject the right sense of purpose into them: 'Send the aliens out!' he called. 'We've all heard the rumours, we know there's a cover-up. Just let us see them!'

'Why don't you come in?' a female voice called back. 'You're all welcome.'

The villagers stepped into the church, and stared at the sight before their eyes.

Ishtar, Kadiatu and Dorothée were sitting, rather artificially quietly, along a pew. Keri, Kitai, Jacquilian and Sanki were standing around the font, from 102

which Keri was scooping water to wash out Kitai's eyes and nose.

'How dare they –!' Macbeth began.

'I gave them permission, actually.' Annie Trelaw was standing behind the eagle-lectern, leafing through the big Bible with the offhand air of a stem but distracted librarian. 'It's God's water and He can do what He likes with it. Do sit down, all of you.'

The mass of people, looking and pointing at the aliens, began to sit down, much to Hamlet's surprise. He could feel a sort of warming blanket of calm enveloping his mind. For a second, he fought it, but then, as one gives in to sleep, he capitulated with relief. He sat down himself.

The singing, he noticed, was coming from those three young men in rather garish flares who had been in the pub. They were maintaining a gentle harmony of ascending tones, like a rather funky church choir.

'Thank you for coming,' Annie looked up and pushed her glasses up

her nose. ‘I’ve offered these four visitors sanctuary. That means you’ll be committing blasphemy, very literally, if you hurt them. Now, I know that I don’t see many of you in here. . . Mr Seedman, hello, this is what the inside of a church looks like, good eh?’ Annie flashed a grin at the embarrassed-looking farmer.

‘But I don’t think any of you really want to do anything nasty. I suspect, actually, that you just want to take a good look at them, and understand that they’re real, and yes, they are aliens, and reassure yourselves that they’re not here to suck out your brains, or anything.’

‘But they said –’ Hamlet began.

‘Hush, Mr Macbeth. I’ve been thoroughly briefed on your personal situation.

Just allow my guests to introduce themselves.’

Jacquilian took a deep breath, and stepped forward from the font. ‘I’m Jacquilian and this is my friend Sanki. . . ’

Outside the church, the Doctor and his companions stood, listening. They could hear only soft singing.

‘It’s quiet,’ Bernice said.

‘Yes.’ The Doctor smiled gently. ‘Isn’t it lovely?

103

The Adventure of the

Curious Landowner,

Chapter Two

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

In the days that followed, I experienced the strangest society of any that I have ever encountered. The locals, plain and cultured alike, adopted the two reptile men, and the two furry hamster-like creatures, to their very hearths. Indeed, many a dinner party was graced by them, with their tales of the greater spaces of the void and of the worlds of the future. Mr Macbeth, whom I had originally taken to be something of a boor, bloomed. I gained the key to his character from a moment when he rushed to a children’s swing, carrying little Keri as a bundle. He placed her on it and began to push her gently to and fro,

all the time asking her questions about her own world. There is nothing, as many of the readers of my current manuscript may now know for themselves, that Pakhars like better than being swung. Mr Macbeth, like, I think, many of the villagers, merely wanted to know their visitors, and not to be afraid of them. The reporter was like a Moses who had lived to embrace his Promised Land, and I noted that his companion, Miss Duvall, had relaxed greatly in his company.

Holmes took several days in his ravenous digestion of all things modern and newsworthy, until, one morning, he burst from Mrs Higgins's bathroom, a towel around his shoulders, singing a currently popular tune, his eyes twinkling. 'I have become "with it", Watson!' he called. 'Shall we pay Officer Forrester a call?'

It was thus that we found Miss Forrester at Mrs Higgins's breakfast table, consuming a piece of marmalade on toast in her usual intense manner. Our landlady, who was hovering about the room with coffee, was now freed of the burden of illusion, and her eyes, previously balloonlike and bloodshot, had reverted to their usual size.

'I am ready for the chase,' Holmes said as he sat down beside Miss Forrester and reached for the teapot.

'You are?' She beat him to the pot and poured a cup for all of us. 'I thought you'd given up.'



'I was merely preparing myself for the challenge of a case outside of my usual environs.' Holmes sipped from his cup, declining milk and sugar. 'I hope, Officer Forrester, that you do not turn out to be this era's Inspector Lestrade.'

Miss Forrester led us, on this pleasant spring morning, to the muddy path where she'd secured her first, and thus far only, piece of evidence. It did occur to me, even then, that the way her Squire, as she referred to Christopher Cwej, had largely ignored her suspicions was suspicious in itself. But I put it down to the joyous preparations surrounding the forth-coming wedding, and the cross-cultural euphoria that had gripped the village since the aliens amongst us had been revealed.

I might mention, as a side-note, that no fewer than three individuals had noticed Holmes and me, and identified us from our style of dress and manner.

We extricated ourselves from the problem quite easily on every occasion, but I mark them here secure in the knowledge that a future editor will strike out this tiny evidence of pride in my own creation. (Holmes is disgusted that they know him only as 'Sherlock Holmes'.)

Miss Forrester presented Holmes with the label from the offending drum, and gave him a dissertation on its forensic properties. Holmes nodded, obviously impressed by her thorough approach, although perhaps only I could perceive that. He immediately fell to his knees amongst the sun-dried mud, and, pulling a lens from his pocket, proceeded to examine every crevice and ridge of the miniature landscape below.

He rose just as swiftly, the lens vanishing back into the pocket of the loose flannels that he wore. 'As you have learnt from your examination of the local maps, Officer Forrester –'

'Roz,' she said, halting Holmes's flow.

'Very well.' He smiled for a moment. 'Roz. This track is used by a number of local farms, four to be exact. We can rule out Hill Cottage Farm instantly, of course –'

'Because it's purely a dairy farm, and any chemical intervention would show up in the milk.'

Holmes halted again, his mouth open, for a scant second before resuming.

But his eyebrows were raised a significant, appreciative, notch. 'Indeed. The other three farms are Mason's, Fernley Ridge and Steel. Let us ignore the first of these, since it has a link to the nearest major road on the other side of the village, and uses this track only to reach outlying fields.'

Miss Forrester frowned. 'But they might have been using the Bloom on those fields.'



'In its original containers? No, they would decant it before use, to prevent discovery. This label came from a supplying vehicle. Or. . . ' His voice trailed off, and he raised his hands, as if to halt a rushing animal. 'Am I making assumptions rather than deductions? You must tell me, both of you, if I miss my step.'

Coming from Holmes, this request was, I found, rather disarming. Miss Forrester was nodding, her hand to her chin. ‘I will. But you’re right. I’m enjoying this already, working with you.’ Her face, it must be said, showed no sign of this, and Holmes paid her statement even less heed.

‘So,’ he continued, ‘that leaves us with Fernley Ridge and Steel. Where shall we start?’

Miss Forrester produced a coin and slapped it on to the back of her palm.

‘You call.’

It was thus that we arrived, after a quarter of an hour’s trek, at a stile that marked the boundary of Steel Farm. The public right of way led around the edges of many small fields of gently swaying corn, still green and unripe.

Holmes and Miss Forrester led the way around the edge of the first field.

The lady pointed to a nearby meadow, in which stood a barn.

The interior of the barn was much as I would have expected, bales of hay

– such as were left of the last year’s harvest – being stacked neatly. But, as Holmes and Miss Forrester had instantly noticed, some of the bales had been disturbed. Holmes grabbed a bale of hay and threw it aside in one smooth movement. Behind it, the upper edge of a door was revealed, the colour of the metal clearly different from that of its surroundings. I gathered that this led to a small annexe to the building that I had noticed from the outside, which all three of us, being foreign to the barns of 2010, had thought was another example of local colour. Now it seemed to be something far more sinister.

We quickly removed the remaining bales, and revealed the silver door in its entirety. Holmes put his ear to where, in a contemporary door, one might expect the lock to be. ‘Nothing,’ he reported. But, for all of us, another sense had been engaged. A malodorous smell had crept under the door, like that of game that has been hung too long.

Holmes and Miss Forrester glanced between them, recognizing, as I did, the stench of flesh.

Miss Forrester slipped something small from her wrist-band, and

pointed it at the door. Lightning flashed between the two, and I was once more astonished by the destructive force of these future weapons. The lock area of the door burst away, and the door swung open.

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Holmes was first inside, and, as Miss Forrester and I followed him, our eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom, we glimpsed him moving between several items that were hanging in clusters from hooks on the ceiling of this metal-enclosed alcove. Although my mind leapt instantly to the most horrific conclusion, I could not help but voice a happier alternative.

'Holmes, are they game birds?'

Holmes turned slowly, clutching in his hand a familiar, if curiously un-formed, human appendage, five toes at the end of it. It hung from its hook by a cord.

'The "game",' he cried, 'is a foot!'

[ *To be continued.* ]

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Interlude

At one point, in the street, while the Doctor was returning from buying some apples, Ruby Duvall ran up to him.

She stared up at him like a little child. 'I haven't been able to. . . ' she began.

'I should have said –'

'Hello.' The Doctor grinned.

'I. . . ' Ruby made herself ask the thing that had always been in her dreams.

'Take me with you, when you go.'

The Doctor didn't even seem to pause to consider. He just reached into his bag, looking rather sad, and took out an apple. He handed it to her.

‘No,’ he said. ‘But I’m glad you asked. Come and have tea.’

So they did.

But he didn’t talk about his reasons.

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Neville Cardus, Do Not Touch Me

It was Saturday morning, a week before the wedding. Sanki leant on the corner of the piano, one set of claws extended in a rakish gesture. The two Earth Reptile musicians had taken up residence in the corner of Mrs Higgins’s par-lour, having been delighted to find a baby grand *in situ*. It had lost all resemblance to tunefulness, but a bit of testing against a tiny electronic tuning-fork and some minor adjustments to the string tension had sorted that out.

‘Me me me me me me me me meee!’ Sanki began, as Jacquilian, sitting on the stool, cracked his knuckles, ready to begin.

‘Oh, it’s always you you you. . . ’ Jacs complained jovially.

‘Just clearing out the passages, dear. These human omis like it high and soft.

Now. . . ’

Both Silurians jumped as the heavy thump of drums began from one of the rooms above.

Cob pointed his drumstick at the wall. ‘Onetwothreefour!’

Danny on guitar and Kit on bass opened up with a high-powered riff, ‘Oxford Street’, as a bit of practice so they could get used to each other. The amps had been plugged into multi-sockets at the walls of Danny’s little room, with cables strewn across the bed and everywhere else. There was just enough room for the three of them, and Danny had hung the microphone from the lampshade for his vocals.

Over his drums, Cob gradually became aware of an arrhythmic thumping coming from the floor. He bashed his drums harder, trying to get it out of his head.

The Isley Brothers had just opened their mouths to sing ‘You know you make me want to –’ in O’Kelly’s bedroom when a hideous, non-musical roar had erupted from the room immediately above them.

Ronald grabbed a vacuum cleaner from the cupboard and swung it at the ceiling, thumping upwards with vigour. ‘That ain’t music!’ he shouted. ‘You doing alien things up there?’

Jacquilian trembled, his third eye blazing with suppressed rage. The combined noise from above had put any practice out of the question.

‘Don’t, Jacs, don’t!’ Sanki cried. ‘Last time you did that, you melted an 111

entire woodwind section!’

Mrs Higgins rushed in, her hands over her ears. ‘Oh, Mr Sanki, Mr Jacquilian, get them all to stop! My other guests are complaining!’

Bernice and Jason were lying in bed, she with her back to him. It had been like that between them for the last few days, Bernice distant, and Jason lost at the sight of that distance.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked again, shocked as he felt her shoulder shrug from his hand.

‘Nothing.’

‘Please tell me, I – What in God’s name is that?’ He leapt up at the noise, grabbing a pillow and wrapping it around his head.

‘That’s “Oxford Street”,’ Bernice murmured, scarcely disturbed. ‘Kit’s forgotten how to play, by the sound of it.’

‘There will be no rehearsal here!’ The Doctor burst into the room where Plasticine were playing and roared, his dressing gown cord flapping.

The band stopped, and blinked at him. The little Time Lord, his hair all ruffled, hardly looked capable of such a bellow.

‘Er, sorry Doctor,’ Danny began. ‘But if you want us to play at the wedding. . . ’

‘There are spaces inside the TARDIS where all of you can play. I’ll programme automated equipment, studios and audiences. Will that do?’

Kit curled his lip. ‘How about groupies?’

‘Of course. Everything you need.’

The band slowly nodded at him, their mouths open.

The Doctor leant on the door after he left the room. ‘Must remember to ask Dorothée what groupies are. . . ’ he muttered. Then he sprang up and went on his way. Today was the day of the cricket match.

Chris and Ishtar walked hand-in-hand across the village green, watching as people from all over the village headed towards the little cricket pitch behind the church. This was going to be the best-attended competition that Cheldon Bonniface had ever played host to, owing entirely to the unusual nature of the teams.

Chris had found the way the village had adapted to the presence of the aliens quite wonderful. Certainly, there had been residual suspicion and fear, but the harmless nature of the four arrivals so far, plus the staunch defence that locals such as Miss Kusinitz and Miss Gjovaag were giving them in the cafés and the sitting rooms, had swung local opinion, at least for the moment.

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The Brigadier, of course, had had his work cut out in restricting communication about this new phenomenon, but his presence alone seemed to have reassured his superiors in London and Geneva. He was walking towards the ground himself now, his mobile phone to his ear, supported by Doris and Kadiatu. ‘A week’s leave, you say? Well come on over, Traylen. The wedding’s not for another week, but the party’s on already. They are? Well bring the whole truckload then. Just tell the quartermaster that the greyhound’s out of the trap. He’ll understand. See you later today, then. Over and out.’

As they drifted out of audible range, Doris and Kadiatu could be heard teasing the old soldier with the insistence that most people would end a phone call with ‘goodbye’. Ishtar squeezed Chris’s hand. ‘He’s lovely, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, he is. He reminds me of an old Adjudicator. Mellow, but he can still bite.’

Ishtar paused, choosing her words carefully. ‘Chris, are you happy here?’

‘Of course I am. Nobody’s shooting at us, torturing us or locking us up. This is a wonderful place.’

‘What if you had to stay?’

‘What, you mean the Doctor’s going to leave us behind?’ Chris laughed ironically. ‘I’d be stuck here with you. Your mother wouldn’t like it.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. . . ’ Ishtar looked away. Absently, she reached into her pocket and produced a small book, which she handed to Chris. ‘I got you something. It’s William Blake. *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

Both in the same volume.’

‘Thank you.’ Chris took the book and kissed her. ‘Appropriate, right?’

‘I thought so.’ Ish gently put a hand on his stomach. ‘And you can get it signed, because he’s going to be a guest at the wedding.’

‘Really?’ Chris smiled, obviously never having heard of the poet. ‘Hey, this looks old. Where did you get it?’

‘Oxfam supermarket.’

Chris pocketed the book. ‘I’ll read that during the game.’

‘Just don’t sit near Emily. She’ll try and persuade you that I should have stuck with the Innocence.’

‘Is she still mad at me?’

‘Not so much lately. She’s too wrapped up in her new book. She called her editor and told her that she was going to work on something else for a while, and she’s been whizzing through the opening chapters of *The Unformed Heart*. She was ahead on her deadline, anyway, but everybody thinks she’s gone mad.’

Chris was about to comment, but just then the couple became aware that the villagers around them were looking up. A sonic boom rolled across the sky, and, high above them, a vapour trail formed in the blue. Chris put a hand 113

up to his eyes. ‘A spaceship. . . quite small, looks like a pirate craft. Hey!’

The last gasp was because, from the craft, which was now accelerating upwards once more, a tiny bundle had detached itself. A parachute canopy had opened, and the bundle, which seemed to be composed of four figures, was drifting to earth from an outrageous altitude.

Most of the villagers applauded. Chris noted that the Brigadier, Yates

and Benton were merely staring skywards, as concerned as he was. No canopy should be able to open at that height without instantly dropping out of the sky and furling up again. Still, these guys were managing it. The four figures grew closer and closer, and the crowd pulled back from the green, trying to give them a space to land in.

The canopy swung at a sudden angle, and started a slow, velocity-sapping spiral. 'They're very good,' Ishtar whispered. 'Max sumptuous!'

'What you said,' agreed Chris.

The Doctor wandered into the breakfast room in his whites. He'd reassured Mrs Higgins that there wouldn't be any more noise, and that all the rooms he'd extradimensionally added to her guest-house last night wouldn't damage the structure. It made sense, since so many more aliens were going to be added to the mix, to have all the guests in one place. That, at least, gave the Doctor a little control over the situation if the climate of opinion changed. The idea of gently introducing a human village to alien contact was appealing, but also hideously dangerous. If Saul's pacification, and the Brigadier's security, and the general goodwill of humanity failed, even for a moment, then the whole system would dissolve into accelerating chaos, damage to the timestream, interstellar war. . . He couldn't quite believe that he was attempting to juggle so many factors just for a wedding.

There was, of course, also the possibility that Mrs Higgins would hit upon the protocols necessary to navigate her guest-house through time and space.

She'd become The Landlady, Bed And Breakfast's Champion, arriving on prim-itive planets and offering the natives overnight accommodation as long as they didn't bring pets.

The Doctor waved this idea aside. He'd headed to the breakfast room in search of his volume of Neville Cardus. He stopped for a moment at one table to chat with Keri and Kitai. Both Pakhars were glad to be going about in their usual forms, even if it did involve gangs of children running up and trying to cuddle them. Keri, though, had worries of her own. She'd been frantically consulting computexts on the rules of cricket, and asked the Doctor whether he really needed her to play. The Doctor insisted. 'The visitors have to play.

This game is to cement good relations. And you've got better hands.'

He was on his way before Keri could ask just what that meant.

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He proceeded into the second half of the breakfast room, past the new partition with the brick-effect wallpaper, still searching for his book.

He found it in the hands of a serious man in a summer suit, his spectacles balanced on the end of his nose, much as his leather-booted feet were balanced by the milk jug on the table.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Good morning, Brax.’

Irving Braxiatel lowered the book imperiously, a slight smile on his lips.

‘You’re trying to learn cricket from Neville Cardus, Thete? One might as well study P.G. Wodehouse for advice on etiquette.’

‘I borrowed a *Know The Game* from the library as well.’ The Doctor plucked the book from the tall academic’s hands. ‘You’ll play, of course?’

‘Hah! You remembered!’ Braxiatel swung his legs off the table. ‘Of course.

Your team will have its work cut out otherwise. Does your TARDIS have a selection of whites? Yes, I’m sure it does. Interesting experiment in social engineering you’re pursuing here, Thete. Terribly dangerous.’

The Doctor looked at him seriously. ‘But terribly life affirming. Now, we’d better get you into the nets.’

The canopy settled around the heads of the four new arrivals, and instantly dissolved into a new shape, an oblong blob of blue matter that bounded around the feet of the new arrivals. ‘Is fun!’ it shouted. ‘Again! Again!’

The villagers clustered round, applauding and producing autograph books.

But two of the four humanoids who had formed the skydivers with the living parachute had already started to argue. One of them was a cutlass-carrying corsair in baggy pants. His eyes were of different colours. The other was a handsome middle-aged woman in a silver

flight suit and a uniform jacket.

‘You. . . ’ she panted, ‘didn’t. . . tell me we’d be freefalling!’

‘It was just a whim on Sgloomi Po’s part,’ the pirate argued. ‘I didn’t know he was going to do that.’

‘Are you sure the Doctor asked you to pick me up, Captain Li Shao?’ she spat. ‘You don’t seem like his usual company.’

‘Listen, you!’ The other female in the party, a muscular young woman in a suit of liquidly moving armour, pulled a blade from the material itself and pointed it at the first woman. ‘We travelled through time and space to find you, using an *invitation* as a power source! Show your captain gratitude!’

‘My captain! I’m also a captain, if you remember, Captain Lisa Deranne, and I’m not used to –’

‘Excuse me, everybody. People are watching.’ A placid, rather strange-looking humanoid placed a hand on each of the others in turn. Slowly, their anger subsided, and they turned to consider the crowd that was forming around them. The woman in the living armour stared at the notepad that 115

was being thrust at her by a cluster of little boys. ‘What are we supposed to do with this?’

‘Sign it,’ Lisa snapped, grabbing one of the pads and scrawling an elegant signature. ‘I thought this was going to be a wedding, not a garden fête.’

Sgloomi Po, the shape-changing blob, was still bouncing around the green, offering a multi-eyed head to a crowd of cheering children to rub and a big seat with handles for them to ride on. ‘Is happy! Is jolly jam-and-cream time!

Is maximum English muffin! Oh yes!’

‘Sgloomi,’ Li Shao muttered, signing his name for the umpteenth time. ‘Why are you talking like that? Don’t get turned into a puppy or something, will you?’

The being looked hurt. It had become a round and rubbery spacehopper, crawling with children. ‘I was merely attempting to be charming and charis-matic, Nathan. Intellect tends to alienate, as I

thought you had yourself discovered.'

Nathan was about to reply when the Doctor wandered past, towards the sports ground, carrying a cricket bag. Chris and Ishtar, who had been attempting to make their way through the crowd to the new arrivals, ran up to his side. 'Doctor, look!' cried Chris, pointing. 'It's the gang from the *Schirron Dream*.'

'What? Oh yes.' The Doctor looked up at the guests, smiled a giddy smile, and waved. 'Captains Deranne and Li Shao, Leetha, Kiru, Sgloomi. Nice to see you. Nathan can have a bat, and show Sgloomi Po this. . . ' He threw his book to an uncomprehending Kiru. 'The game starts in half an hour.'

The two captains looked at each other. 'I was hoping for a bath at least,'

muttered Lisa.

Emily had taken her laptop into the clean and airy sanctuary of Carrie O'Grady's, a café and lunch place that always smelt of fresh bread. Provided with a bottomless glass of Pimm's by O'Grady herself, she had proceeded to flash through the opening chapter of her novel. The great novel. The one that would free her from drudgery for ever.

She raised an eyebrow at it. Utterly libellous, most of it. Still, one only had to change a couple of names. She even knew the right line to publish it: Jasmine Books. It was just their thing. Never worked for them before, but this time. . . It was just impossible to consider their turning it down.

She looked up from the laptop and the black-and-white-chequered table-cloth when James the verger came in, clad in his whites. 'Oh, hullo, James.

Having a nice day?'

James seemed a little worried to see her there, for a moment. Then he smiled. 'Bit nervous about the match, Mrs H. Came to see Carrie, actually. See 116

you soon.' He wandered across to the counter, and a slow smile spread over Emily's face as she watched him swinging his hands and grinning sheepishly in front of Miss O'Grady, who had come out from behind the counter, adjusting her apron and smoothing her hair. Everybody was getting romantic this spring. Most of them where they shouldn't

be. At least Ishtar was playing in the match today, so that man from space wasn't about to get his claws into her again. Emily's thoughts drifted once more to that afternoon by the barn, to that formative moment. She'd considered telling Bernice about Jason and Dorothée, but – and this convinced Emily that she'd gone completely mad – it seemed somehow more honest to let her discover it herself.

Besides, it made a better story.

Emily glanced at her watch, switched off her laptop and stood up, waving to little Miss O'Grady, who was deep in conversation with James. It was nearly time for the game. She resisted the temptation to wink.

And so it was that the Doctor and Mr Miller met in the middle of the Cheldon Bonniface cricket pitch, under the eye of one of the umpires, Annie Trelaw, who held a ten-pound coin in her palm. 'Who'll toss?' she asked.

'Visitors' privilege,' said the landlord. From the look in his eye, he didn't much share his neighbours' newfound enthusiasm for their visitors.

The Doctor took the coin, glanced at it, and then flicked it into the air with his thumb, so that it spun like a little star in the sunlight. 'Heads,' he said. He watched it go into the absolute blue overhead, wondering why this game felt like a negotiation. All around the pitch, beyond the loop of white rope that marked the boundary, were gathering villagers. Many of them, and many from other towns. News travelled, despite the Brigadier's blackout. The rumour had spread that the aliens were here, finally, after everybody's cousin had had some fleeting or fatal contact with one in the urban legends of the twenty-first century. Contrary to all expectation, they had come to play cricket. Quite a few of the crowd had cameras. They filled the space between boundary and hedge beyond, stood on milk crates behind that hedge, and hung from the old oak tree at the station end.

The Doctor thought, as he watched the coin spin, that this was possibly the most important thing that he'd ever done, or at least a microcosm of it. He'd organized a game instead of an invasion. A festival for those with scales and claws.

He flared his nostrils, sucked in the clean English air, and grabbed the coin from the sky. He slapped it down on to the back of his hand. Chris had suggested that he should let the locals win. But no.

The game must be played.

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He lifted his other hand, revealing the coin. Heads up. He grinned at the landlord. ‘Heads it is,’ he said. ‘We’ll bat.’

The team that was gathered in the Doctor’s corner of the little pavilion would have perplexed Neville Cardus no end. John Benton (the other two UNIT men having pleaded infirmity) was stretching his tanned old legs against the wall, pulling on his pads. Keri was looking around nervously, flipping through a copy of *Teach Yourself Cricket* and holding it at odd, misunderstanding angles from time to time. Braxiatel was sitting quietly on a bench, studying the scene with his penetrating gaze. The Doctor hoped that he wasn’t going to play this game ironically, as he sometimes did. He was so good, in intellectual as well as sporting pursuits, that he often pretended *not* to be, to give himself a rest.

No ambition, that one, or no sense of adventure. Watson was looking at home in his borrowed whites, studying the shine on a ball with a youthful gleam in his eye. The Doctor had asked if Holmes would be playing, knowing that the Great Detective had occasionally turned his hand to the bat; but Watson had murmured discreetly that Holmes was Thinking, something that the Doctor took to be quite ominous. Bernice, who claimed to have played something like cricket on Heaven, was pulling on pads over culottes, and glancing towards the door from time to time. Jason was supposed to have formed half of the Visitors’ opening partnership, but was late for the Doctor’s team talk, indeed, like most of the team. In Jason’s case, though, the Doctor could tell that Bernice’s thoughts were drifting inexorably towards worry.

‘Do you think Jason’s coming?’ he asked.

Bernice gave a last little grunt and secured the final clasp on her pads. ‘I haven’t quite honed my suspicions to that level of accuracy.’

Dorothée was sitting in the graveyard, her back to a headstone, listening to the silence of the village, now that everybody was at the match. She would have liked to pop into the building to see Saul, but. . . but what? Not that old guilt stuff, after all these years? Nah, probably not. Just her being her, being Ace. She ought to get up, wander down to the ground, climb the tree and see Benny bat.

She was just about to stand when Jason poked his head around the

gravestone behind her. ‘Hello again. I didn’t expect to see you here.’

Dorothée bit her bottom lip. ‘Didn’t you?’

‘No.’ He sat down beside her. ‘Can I sit down?’

‘You just did. I was thinking, right? We shouldn’t be doing this. Not again.

If you told Benny about this now, she might forgive you. It might still all be OK. If you sit down there, you know what’s going to happen.’

Jason took her chin in one big, gentle hand. ‘I do.’

* * *

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Hamlet Macbeth burst through the pavilion doors, clad in a set of gleaming whites, from which his stomach narrowly failed to bulge. He pointed at the Doctor with his bat. ‘Doctor, you are a man, or should I say person, or should I say’ – he swirled the bat thoughtfully for a moment – ‘ *being*, short. Allow me to volunteer my services. I played with some success at university level.’

The Doctor frowned. The team did need another player, but he still couldn’t quite look the researcher in the eye. He opened his mouth, about to say no. Then he closed it again, angry at his hypocrisy. He knew that Bernice was looking between him and Macbeth questioningly. He met the man’s gaze carefully. ‘Are you a Visitor, then, Hamlet?’ He’d kept Roz and Chris out of the team on the basis that the crowd would want to see as many exotic players as possible, one Pakhar and one Silurian in the team, and one of each in the crowd.

Macbeth spread his arms wide. ‘To an entire new world, Doctor, thanks to you. I have been waiting through this mean, earthly life, only to play on this team.’

‘Then play.’ The Doctor’s terse words were interrupted as Sanki and Nathan Li Shao ran in, signing final autographs for the mass of schoolboys that still pestered outside.

‘This game. . . wicket or whatever it is. . . ’ Nathan asked the Doctor. ‘Can you explain the rules?’

‘And does the loser get sacrificed?’ Sanki added.

‘Yes, and no. Catch. . . oh yes, that’s a start.’ He threw pebble-sized learning pills to several of his team. ‘Those will fill you in on the basics. Don’t chew them. You don’t want knowledgeable teeth.’

‘I notice you didn’t give me one of those,’ Bernice smiled. ‘Don’t the rest of us. . . oh my Gods!’ Her glance had moved from the Doctor to the door as it swung open again. Now the look on her face was one of pure horror.

The Doctor followed her stare to where the whole room was looking.

At the door stood a tall man with soft eyes. He was clad in medieval armour, and he was clutching a cricket bat. ‘Bernice,’ he said, in a heavy French accent.

‘It is I, Guy. You do not know how good it is to see you again. And, surprise! I can wield a bat as well as a sword!’

Bernice closed her eyes and crumpled into a heap.

‘You know,’ Nathan said, ‘that’s the first time I’ve actually seen anybody do that.’

Roz and Holmes were sitting in deck-chairs, just beyond the boundary. The detective, a fedora pulled tightly down over his eyes, had been contemplating nothing beyond the spire of his hands for the last hour, his pupils dancing back and forth.



To Roz, this was agonizing. ‘What are you thinking?’ she finally asked.

‘I am expecting a. . . I nearly said a telegram.’ Holmes pulled off the fedora and straightened in his chair. ‘An e-mail. At the home of Mr Peter Hutchings, who is, as they say, on the net.’ Roz could see the gleam in his eyes. He’d sworn her and Watson to secrecy concerning their macabre discovery, promising developments. ‘It concerns – ah. . . ’ He pointed across the ground at an elegant figure, one of the fielding side, who were walking out on to the pitch to vast applause. The man had a neatly trimmed beard and an upright, aris-tocratic gait. ‘Watch that man, Officer Forrester. He may be unaccustomed to the role, but nevertheless, he is one of our suspects. Perhaps the most obvious, since we found the barn on his land.’

‘That’s what I don’t understand. Why don’t we –?’

‘Arrest him? On what charge? Or should we confront him with our tales of stumpy limbs, so he may hide the evidence? No, Officer Forrester. His name is Alec Steel, Lord Tasham.’ A half-smile briefly passed over Holmes’s sardonic features. ‘In Watson’s account of this affair, I shall doubtless be on the field against him, even as we speak.’

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

I stared down into Professor Summerfield’s lifeless eyes, hoping against hope that she had not injured herself in the fall, and that her faint had done her no harm. The smelling-salts in my hand finally had some effect, and I thanked my Creator as she coughed, and those sweet eyes blinked open. ‘Dear Watson. . .

what has happened?’ she asked, as if waking from a dream.

The creature known as Sgloomi Po bounced forward, now returned to its normal, oblong form. ‘So sorry,’ it said. ‘I take the shape and personality of what others expect or want. Takes effort not to. Didn’t realize.’

‘I wanted. . . Guy back,’ Bernice said as she sat up. ‘And the rest of you wanted somebody who could play cricket. Well, I think we should all just go home, don’t you?’ Her wit belied the doubts which troubled her heart.

Just then, the door was flung open once more, and in slouched Jason Kane, the ruffian whom the Professor had, for reasons that I never quite divined, agreed to marry. He took the situation in with his small eyes, and, to his meagre credit, scuttled quickly to her side. ‘Bernice!’ he cried. ‘What happened?’

Bernice told him the story, and he apologized, gruffly, for his lateness, stating that he had been lunching in Miss O’Grady’s establishment, purchasing a sandwich. A likely story, I thought, observing the redness of lipstick discolour-ing his collar. Still, I kept my counsel. The others, for their part, had often heard him state that Miss O’Grady did the best luncheon in the world, and 120

accepted his words. He adjusted his collar quickly, perhaps quickly enough so that his fiancée did not see. But I knew that, henceforth, I would not trust Mr Kane.

The Doctor aided him in helping Professor Summerfield to her feet,

and glanced around the room. ‘Well, they’re expecting us,’ he announced. ‘Jason, Sergeant Benton, play up and play the game!’

[ *To be continued.* ]

The Doctor stood at the door of the pavilion, his players behind him, and listened to the rapturous applause as Jason, who’d quickly strapped his pads on, and John Benton, took the field. He’d felt, perhaps unwisely, that two twentieth-century terrans would be the best openers. He was just feeling his way back into the game, aware that his fifth self had known all the ins and outs of it. That knowledge was like something a friend had once told him.

Not the stuff of personal experience. He glanced at the audience, picking out old friends and expectant faces, and wondered if the nervousness he felt was just stage fright.

The landlord had assembled what was, basically, the Cheldon Bonniface cricket A side, albeit with one or two compromises in the face of the Doctor’s unexpected choice of female players. He’d brought in Ishtar, widely recognized as an athlete, if not necessarily a cricketer, and, to everybody’s surprise, Miss Kusinitz, captain of the all-Holland Ladies’ Eleven in 1964, as she’d told the Doctor, but, even so, considerably older than any other human on the field. She’d turned out in a pair of dainty slacks that looked as though they’d last seen the light of day in the early seventies; but Ishtar, much to the audience’s delight, strode to the far boundary in a sports skirt and a *Bones And Kay* T-shirt. Chris blew a wolf-whistle at her and she flicked the hem at him, grinning.

Mr Miller took up his place behind the wicket solemnly, and Annie signalled for the game to begin. Jason took his stance at the wicket to face the first ball, bowled, unfortunately, by Mr Cooke, the baker with a competitive glint in his eye who had tried to haul Benny off to the stake. He had apologized since, but that was the mundane world and this was cricket. He took a long run-up, and bowled the ball straight at Jason’s head.

Jason closed his eyes and swung the bat at it wildly. There was a thunk of wood on wood, and Jason opened his eyes again when the crowd roared. The ball had bounced over the boundary rope for four, right into the hands of a cheering schoolboy, and several yards from the outstretched hands of James the verger.

Jason took up his stance again and winked at John Benton. ‘That’s what the right preparation before a game does for you.’

He wondered why Benton’s only response was a glower.

‘Yes!’ Bernice, watching from the pavilion steps, punched the air. ‘Ten goals!’

‘Goals?’ the Doctor enquired.

‘That’s how we played.’ Bernice leant on his shoulder. ‘It’s unfortunate, but I do love that man.’ She paused. ‘Despite the possibility that he’s bonking everybody from Tasham and that woman at the café too. I am in serious danger of suffering a broken heart.’

‘Yes.’ the Doctor mused, twiddling his fingers. He was aware of Bernice’s suspicions concerning the cause of Jason’s lateness, and she’d told him of Dorothée’s reticence on the subject, and the rumours from the disco, but he couldn’t bring himself to think the same way. There was something about Jason that he found trustworthy. Normally, that would have been enough.

‘How do you feel? Physically, I mean?’

‘Fine.’ Benny poked him in the chest. ‘Sorry for all the swearing when I woke up. That’s my one faint for all of my life. Never again. It was just Sgloomi being a Sloathe, and Sloathes will be Sloathes. As for what it revealed about my thoughts at that moment, I trust everybody will keep the details from Jason.’ There was a touch of bitterness in her voice. ‘It might put him off his game.’

In the crowd, the Brigadier, with Doris, Yates and Kadiatu at his side, was examining the programme that the Doctor had distributed to those who’d paid their entrance fee. The fee was a donation to the church repair fund.

The programme was a breach of the Official Secrets Act. The Brigadier was staring at it with a growing sense of horror.

‘When do the boys arrive?’ Doris asked, completely oblivious.

‘If you mean the UNIT guard of honour and catering corps, any time now,’

said the Brigadier. ‘Allowing for the roads and how many of them are sober.’

He turned back to Yates, and pointed at an offending paragraph in the booklet.

‘Do you realize, Captain Yates, that this gives full biographies on a Silurian, a Pakhar, and whatever that Po creature is? Not to mention this: “Mr John Watson is a fictional character, but please applaud him anyway.” Are the people of Earth quite ready for this?’

‘As long as they’re applauding, sir.’ Yates plucked a pair of round, orange-tinted sunglasses from his pocket and propped them on his nose. ‘It’s when they start screaming that we’re in trouble.’

The Brigadier looked at Yates’s spectacles for a moment. ‘For some of us,’

he muttered under his breath, ‘I suspect that date is long past.’

* * *

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Jason had knocked a couple of balls from Cooke aside with care. He’d had an unexpectedly nice lunch; the sun was high in a clear blue sky. What better day to compile a century? Of course, his only exposure to cricket had been watching the occasional match from beyond the boundary, and ignoring several more on telly, but he felt sure that this was a game he could master.

He was thinking just such thoughts when the baker’s fourth ball, a yorker, whipped along the ground and bounced neatly off Jason’s shin, right before his middle stump.

‘How is he?’ bellowed the landlord.

After a second’s thought, Annie raised her finger.

‘Does that mean what I think it does?’ Jason asked Benton.

Bernice and Jason passed as she came on and he came off.

She opened her mouth in horror at the sight of his collar, Jason having opened it at bat.

‘Adulterer,’ she hissed.

‘But, listen –’

‘We’ll talk later, adulterer.’

‘And good luck to you, too.’ Jason called as he headed into the pavilion.

Bernice was sure that John Benton looked at her with a kind of reassuring concern when she reached the wicket. She didn’t feel in any mood to play.

Or maybe she did, because knocking a few balls over the boundary was quite close, conceptually, to exactly what she’d like to do right now.

‘Ah, Benny, I think that crease is enough,’ Benton gently called. Benny looked down. She’d dug a little trench with the end of her bat.

‘I’m setting up home,’ she said brightly. ‘I’m never going back to the pavilion again.’

The Doctor watched intently, fanning his face with his hat, as Bernice and Benton continued to face the attentions of the young baker. The ex-sergeant got his first runs, two of them, off a rare misjudged full toss, and the Doctor detected a pleasing determination in Benny’s running between the wickets.

Fast on the first run, slower on the second. Perhaps she had played this game before, after all. The last ball of the baker’s second over arrived, deceptively swift on the leg side, and Benton, obviously thinking that he’d got the measure of this bowler, swiped at it.

On the field, Peter Hutchings, who’d been staring intently at Benton’s shoulder, in between glancing at what his daughter was wearing, leapt into the air.

His hands closed safely around the ball, and he threw it into the air, whooping.



As his team mates closed in on Peter with applause, and Benton, a wry smile on his face, turned towards the pavilion, the Doctor put a thoughtful finger up to his chin.

‘I can bat a bit,’ said Watson. ‘I’m sure that the Professor and I could form a useful partnership.’

‘In your dreams,’ muttered Jason, who’d been sulking on the steps since getting out.

‘I think not.’ The Doctor turned to the interior of the pavilion. Assuming, quite reasonably, that they wouldn’t be two for six in the second over, nobody had yet padded up. ‘Hamlet, you’re on. Time to take arms against outrageous fortune.’

‘Thank you, Doctor!’ a voice boomed from inside, and the sounds of frantic buckle-fastening and box-affixing followed. A few moments later, Hamlet Macbeth positively ran from the pavilion, whirling his bat about his shoulder, which elicited a cheer from the crowd. He bowed to them. ‘Delighted, my dears!’

The Doctor allowed himself a smile.

‘Are you a better cricketer than a torturer?’ Benny asked Macbeth as he headed for the opposite wicket. He saw that she was full of anger, that it was spilling out at everyone. And, of course, they had unfinished business.

‘My dear, that was research, not torture.’

‘That’s what they all say.’

‘I considered the Doctor to be –’

‘An alien? So you could do what you liked?’

Macbeth strode to his wicket, stood to his full height and affected a straight bat. ‘That is an accurate representation of my attitude then. And either way, the answer to your question is yes.’

Jason, the Doctor saw out of the corner of his eye, was wiping something from his collar. The young man glanced up. ‘Carrie’s idea of a joke,’ he muttered, as if unsure that anybody was listening.

The Doctor turned to him and confirmed to himself that the comment had been for his ears. ‘What?’

‘We’ve become friends. She makes me lunch, she kissed my lapel. To make Benny jealous, she said.’

‘You don’t have to explain to me.’

‘I know, but –’

‘They’re doing well, aren’t they?’ The Doctor’s eyes had shot back to the field. After another over, Miller had had Cooke replaced, obviously saving his best bowler’s remaining five overs for the end of the match. If they ever got 124

that far. The new bowler was James the verger, whose entry proved disastrous for the villagers. Bernice and Macbeth had hammered his gentle spin all over the field, and the score was now forty-eight for two. The partnership seemed to be based on mutual daring, each one running before they should, pushing the other one into greater efforts. Against this slow village side, it was working. The Doctor’s eyes alighted for a moment on Lord Tasham, standing by the boundary, his hands clasped behind him in a very non-fielderly posture.

He was visibly shaking his head at James’s poor performance.

Miller handed the ball back to Cooke. The baker took a long run back, and pitched a fine ball just past Macbeth’s shoulder. Macbeth barely swung at it, but enough for a touch, and the landlord grabbed the spinning sphere from the air with a flourish.

Macbeth didn’t wait for Annie to raise her finger. He turned from his wicket, saluted Bernice with a flip of his wild locks and a look that might have been anything from apology to aggression, and marched towards the pavilion, raising his bat to the crowd as if he’d made a century rather than twelve.

Braxiatel wandered past the Doctor’s shoulder, unconcerned. ‘Put the kettle on in about two hours,’ he murmured as he headed for the wicket. ‘I’ll try not to embarrass them.’

The afternoon rolled on, Bernice’s innings coming to an end as Peter Hutchings ran her out with a joyous shout of triumph that nearly made her clobber him with the bat. She returned to the opposite end of the pavilion from Jason, and proceeded to ignore the stilted conversation of both him and Watson.

Braxiatel and the Doctor formed what looked like a natural partnership, until Peter’s seam bowling ended it early, getting Brax to nudge an easy ball to the keeper. The Doctor was more cautious, slowly putting together twenty against Ishtar’s explosive, and usually wide, bowling. With him and the equally cautious, not to say terrified, Keri at the crease, the score became rather more respectable, and his team mates breathed a little easier.

The Doctor found himself in a kind of nirvana of concentration on the

field, keeping in mind all the separate tasks of cricket, and distantly aware that, around the ground, people were relaxing, eating ice-creams, dogs were jumping and children playing. And all this while watching a giant alien hamster play sport.

The trouble set in when Keri took a breath after a particularly close run.

'Gosh,' she said. 'That was – aaaahh. . . '

'Keri!' the Doctor warned.

But it was too late.

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' *Choo!* ' A fixed expression froze Keri's features with the sneeze, and she stared at the gentle run-up of Lord Tasham. She barely reacted to the spinning ball flying from his hand.

Until, that is, the ball was a few feet from her. Then, with a blood-curdling screech of fear, she swatted it straight up. The landlord ran forward, staring up into the sky, and positioned himself under the falling ball. An easy catch.

Keri was about to swing the bat at him, too, until the Doctor grabbed her and, with a swish of paisley handkerchief, urged her to blow her nose.

She blinked at him. 'Let me guess. I'm out, yeah?'

'A very long way.' The Doctor pocketed his handkerchief, patted the Pakhar on the head and sent her on her way with a smile. 'We must find a cure for that.'

Nathan Li Shao made a valiant sixteen until Cooke knocked his stumps flying, and James's patience was rewarded with the Doctor's wicket, knocking the ball into the hands of Mr Sinner, who, the ecclesiastical positions in the village having all been taken, was rather disappointingly the local butcher.

Sanki and Watson then formed a particularly applauded partnership, the Earth Reptile having modified the handle of his bat to suit his claws.

'I'm so proud of him,' muttered Jacquilian, who was sharing an iced

tea with Ruby Duvall. ‘And to think that two poor, struggling musicians like me and him would end up exploring Earth PA.’

‘PA?’ asked Ruby.

‘Pre-Awakening, deary. You could say the two of us aren’t due up for a while.’

Holmes glanced up from his thoughts. ‘Dear me, Watson, what an awful stroke.’ He turned to Roz. ‘His talents really do lie in bowling.’

Ishtar, who seemed to be getting more worked up the more she bowled, finally had Sanki out, caught by Sergeant Burk (his dog tied to the tree) for three.

Sanki threw up his claws in dismay. ‘Ooh, and I was just starting to enjoy that.’

A hush descended upon the crowd as a familiar figure strode from the pavilion. Then the hush became a roar of applause. Don Bradman, in glorious detail, right down to the badge on his cap, was walking on to the field.

Peter Hutchings kicked the ground in fury. ‘That’s really not on!’ he cried.

‘Just because he can time-travel! There’s got to be something in the rules about that!’



Bradman smiled at him as he passed. ‘Is me. Who is this fellow everybody give clap to?’

Back in the pavilion, the Doctor shrugged. ‘Well, it’s who *I* wanted.’

Sgloomi Po was swiftly seized by his Lordship in Cooke’s last, deadly spell, nowhere near as good at cricket as impersonation, and Watson, to sudden, enthusiastic applause by Holmes, carried his bat back to the pavilion. The Doctor’s side had made a rather unsatisfactory 140 all out, and had got only as far as the first ball of the twenty-ninth over. It was with a sense of anticipation that the landlord’s team left the field.

‘Well, that’s what you get for fielding a team of aliens, yeah?’ Keri said, dis-consolate, her furry cheek propped on Jason’s shoulder.

Bernice was glaring at them suspiciously.

The Doctor looked around his team, wondering what he could do to galvanize them again. They were hardly looking at each other, with a range of expressions that went from Jason's and Bernice's shared sulk, through Braxiatel's lofty disdain, to Macbeth's vast Celtic slump.

'You all being here is what matters,' he said. 'There are distant observers to our game today, I'm sure. Powers of the universe that would like to see mankind and aliens at each other's throats.' He hopped up on to an equipment locker and grasped his lapels, then let go of them, aware that the effect had been comic rather than grand. 'But when we all go into the field today, the people around this ground will love us, because we're here, and we're playing their game.'

'So you're saying it's not winning or losing, but how you play the game?'

Bernice asked suddenly, and rather tersely. She had her back to Macbeth and Jason. 'Coming from you, that's rather rich.'

'Well,' the Doctor murmured quietly, 'sometimes it's how you play that lets you win. You realize that you're involved in a different game. Your partnership with Mr Macbeth, for example.'

'Oh?' It sounded like a challenge.

'I think it would have been even better if you could have managed to look him in the eye.'

Dorothée awoke, amid the sweet-smelling wood of a copse of trees at the edge of the churchyard, and wondered if it had all been a dream.

No, she swiftly concluded, feeling the lovebites on her neck. It had been real. Damn it. Better than last time. This was getting to be a dangerous habit.

She'd have to tell Bernice soon, or this would all be. . . well, totally unethical.

Ahem.

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She sat up, and buttoned up her jeans. No sign of the bastard. He'd

have been swiftly off to the ground to play his innings. Dorothée suddenly found that she was sad to have missed the game so far. Especially in favour of. . .

God, that was just such a creepy thing to do to a mate.

She stood up, and almost instantly tripped over. Righting herself, she looked round, and found nothing. The sun was high in the sky. Bit of dizziness, that was all.

She set off for the cricket pitch at a march, cursing herself for complexity and difficulty and doubt all the way.

And, amongst all that, she never considered why she tripped.

By the time Dorothée reached the pitch, stopping on a couple of occasions to check the state of various items of clothing, the village side were well into their innings. Jason was dancing on the spot, punching the sky, as the policeman who had arrested him slouched off the field, a victim of his over-energetic bowling. Dorothée's eyes found Bernice behind the wicket, hardly sharing in her fiancé's glee, before checking out the scoreboard. The man had made forty-four before Jason had nudged him into Nathan Li Shao's hands. Previously, the Doctor's spin-bowling had disposed of the landlord for just two, but the situation still looked grim. Somebody Dorothée didn't recognize was wandering out to join Mr Sinner at the wicket. She settled into a gap between two deck-chairs to watch the proceedings.

Somebody tapped her on the shoulder. It was a handsome, middle-aged woman who just happened to be wearing silver trousers. 'Excuse me,' she said. 'Don't I know you?'

Dorothée looked at her carefully. 'Sorry, I don't think so.'

'Lisa Deranne.'

'Nope, still no idea.'

Lisa sighed and settled down beside her. 'I hate it when that happens. You meet so many people in space travel. Oh well, maybe you can tell me what the idea behind this silly game is.'

Dorothée inclined her head slightly. 'Well, you're going to be unlucky there, and all. . . '

Bernice glared at her (increasingly unlikely) husband-to-be from her

position behind the wicket, and mouthed something obscene at him. Not the kind of obscenity he enjoyed, either, but something blunt involving a stump. The look on his face was one of utter guilt. Or sorrow. One or the other.

She noticed the Doctor smiling from time to time as he wandered about the boundary. He didn't look downcast, but despite his platitudes before the innings, the team were looking very like a house divided. You could see the 128

fielders slumping as the villagers' unstoppable innings wore on, and even Jason's wicket just now had resulted in only the most cursory celebration. The alien fielders, whom the Doctor had put out on the boundary, were distracted by endless photographs and questions.

But, as the innings continued, a strange thing started to happen. Nathan Li Shao, who, informed as they all were by the knowledge tablets, had discovered a talent for bowling, took two wickets, the Doctor catching both of them at different, quietly selected, positions on the field. That quick, easy motion of the Doctor's catches, snatching the ball out of the air, convinced Bernice that he had a game going. A game within a game. Or perhaps even a game within a game within a game.

When Sanki started to bowl, spinning the ball out of his extended claws, she became certain that there was method in the Time Lord's madness. The wild spin of the ball sent Peter Hutchings, laughing, into Keri's open paws, and Seedman, the farmer, took up his place opposite his Lordship, who so far had grafted away to five runs. There was something about the nobleman's stance that suggested confidence, and, before Sanki began his next over, he turned to Bernice and said: 'My dear Miss Summerfield, I do hope you're not finding your position too uncomfortable.'

'Not at all. I could squat behind five pieces of wood all day.'

'I'm glad to hear it. The Doctor has a way of putting his companions into unfortunate positions. You could be terribly injured.'

'Companions?' Bernice frowned.

'Comrades. Team-mates,' Lord Tasham said, turning back to face Sanki.

'Most of his field placings are. . . shall we say unusual?'

Before Bernice could reply, Sanki sent the ball spinning forward. In slow motion, she saw Tasham raise the bat, then hesitate.

The hall clipped the edge of it, and spun to her right.

Benny dived at it, and rolled, proudly clutching the red sphere in her gloves.

As her team-mates ran to help her up, she smiled to Tasham. ‘Yes. But they seem to work.’

At ninety for six, things still looked pretty rotten. The villagers had plenty of overs to build their total past 140, and didn’t have to take many risks to do it. Seedman and James the verger looked set to make the total themselves, batting themselves in as Watson bowled a maiden. His gentle offspin didn’t seem to be having much effect, thought Bernice, probably because he looked her in the eye before every ball.

With James standing in front of her, she found herself wanting to confide in Watson, to lean on the essential decency of the man. If Jason really was playing around, or even thinking about it, then a brief flirtation, maybe even 129

a hint of something more, with Watson might galvanize him into monogamy.

Goodness, if he was having it away with somebody, then the whole matter of geese, ganders and sauce arose. Watson was quite shy, his code of conduct for women so limited. If one were to push those limits, perhaps under a shady tree somewhere. . .

‘Catch it!’ somebody was bellowing. The ball whizzed past Benny’s shoulder, and John Benton just managed to kick it away from the boundary.

‘Sorry,’ she muttered. James had made two in the meantime, turning back to her with a victorious grin.

‘Bad luck!’ Watson called, and gave Bernice an encouraging little smile.

She found herself smiling back. Oh dear.

With the very next ball, Watson took James’s wicket, the verger knocking the ball straight to Keri. Two balls later, his eight overs were

complete, and he returned to the boundary, much to Benny's relief.

Nathan took Seedman's wicket, Sanki somehow managing to hold on to a catch, and the villagers were ninety-nine for eight. At the wicket, much to the landlord's horror, were Ishtar Hutchings and Miss Kusinitz, both of whom, apparently, could bat better than his fast bowler, Mr Cooke. Ishtar had arrived at the crease with a purposeful stomp, and settled her perfect bottom right on Benny's eyeline.

'Don't go all mad, dear!' called the dressmaker from the other end. 'We can afford to do this slowly.'

'Yeah, but we're going to do it right,' Ishtar called back. 'My boyfriend's watching.'

Her words made Bernice feel very alone, all of a sudden, and she found herself glancing back to the boundary. Jason was standing there, looking very alone too.

The partnership proved a thorn in the side of the Visitors. While Miss Kusinitz

– applauded loudly and raucously by Miss Gjovaag, who had opened a bottle of sherry – seldom took her shots, Ishtar made good progress. Sanki bowled Miss Kusinitz to Watson for ten, leaving Ishtar, on fifteen, to partner the very nervous Cooke at 130 for nine. They needed only eleven more runs, and had eight more overs to get them. An absolute certainty, but only if they didn't hurry and get themselves out. The crowd were chanting, excited that what they had taken to be a freakish exhibition match had turned into a nailbiting game of cricket. Better still, it looked as if the villagers were going to beat their guests from space and time. Benny glanced at the Doctor and saw him enjoying the atmosphere. It was, she thought, exactly the opposite of what he was used to, and quite a trick: to turn a mob into an audience.

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Nathan came in to bowl again, his buccaneer sleeves flapping as he bore down on the wicket. His over yielded six of the runs needed, much to the crowd's delight. Then the Doctor walked over to him and said something that Benny couldn't hear. He started another over with a long run-up. Ishtar tensed at the crease, watching his arm.

It was close to being a full toss. Ishtar hooked at it, sending it high into the air, and immediately realized what she'd done. The ball hung

over Sanki, at the boundary, who raised his claws in panic. ‘Ooh!’ he cried, running backwards. ‘Why did it have to come this way?’ The ball was either going to go for a six and win the match, or going to fall into his waiting claws and lose it.The crowd sucked in a breath.

The ball seemed to hover in the sky, framed in Sanki’s three lines of sight.

He backed right up to the boundary rope, careful not to touch it, and reached his scaly arms up into the air.

‘Catch it!’ called a little boy of about six who sat right behind him.

‘You shouldn’t be supporting us,’ called Sanki, without taking his eyes off the ball.

‘But I like you,’ the boy told him. ‘You’re a monster.’

Sanki leant back as the ball descended, formed his claws into a cup, and with a little hoot of joy, grasped the sphere as it fell. He swayed back from the boundary with a jerk of his lithe muscles.

The Doctor’s team, and large sections of the crowd, exploded into the air with delight.

Ishtar dropped her bat and clapped with them as the villagers flowed on to the pitch, embracing their own team and the visitors alike.

And Benny found herself laughing in the arms of Hamlet Macbeth.

And she looked into his eyes.

And there was nothing strange there at all.

Peter Hutchings worked his way through the crowd to where Ishtar and Chris were kissing passionately. ‘Hey!’ he called. They looked up and quickly separated. Peter stopped and waved his hands by his side awkwardly. ‘I just wanted to say. . . well done, love.’

‘She did good, didn’t she?’ Chris grinned.

‘Coming for dinner, then?’ Peter asked his daughter hopefully.

Before Ish could say anything, Chris had grabbed the wrong end of the stick.

‘We’d love to, thanks!’

Peter would never be sure whether he would have been specific about the invitation or not, because then a sudden shadow swept across the ground.

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The crowd fell silent.

Something huge had just appeared overhead.

A burst of static flashed about the roofs of the village, striking the church tower with a crack of close thunder. A steady roar washed over the ground.

Three hundred heads looked up.

In the sky floated a vast green spacecraft, sharklike and long, with cannon ports in serrated nacelles along its smooth and sinister sides.

'A spacecraft!' Peter gasped, clapping his hands together in delight. Just for a second, he'd forgotten to be afraid. 'They must have folded the continuum behind and in front of them. Look, those pods on the side, they seem to be sort of shimmering, perhaps –'

'Peter,' Ishtar said, having noted that Chris was looking concerned rather than excited, 'what if they're hostile?'

'In a minute, in a minute. . . ' Peter waved her away.

The Brigadier had stood slowly, Yates at his side. 'Damn. So many people.

They'll be sitting ducks. Don't recognize the type, do you, Yates?'

'I do,' Kadiatu interrupted. 'We might be fine.'

'Oh?' The Brigadier turned to her, surprised. 'What are the odds on "might be"?'

'That depends on what time period they're from.'

The Brigadier's attention was distracted by a noise from the other side of the ground. A dun-coloured convoy of three trucks, the UNIT logo on their canvas frames, was pulling in by the ground, their horns sounding.

'I see the old firm hasn't lost its sense of timing,' Yates murmured.

The Doctor and Benny ran into the centre of the crowd, waving their arms to the craft above, and a little clearing opened for them.

'Is it them?' Benny asked.

'Unless somebody's stolen their spacecraft for a bit of intergalactic ram-raiding.'

Far above, something very like an orchestra's brass section rang out. A circular port opened in the underside of the craft, and a platform descended from it, with no visible means of support. On the platform stood five figures, the details of which only those at the very edge of the ground could begin to pick out.

The Doctor and Bernice were surprised to find a squad of UNIT soldiers, their rifles unslung, running into the clearing in the crowd. 'Right,' one of them shouted. 'I want these civilians cleared out of here now!'

Bernice glanced at the descending platform, and tapped the soldier on the shoulder. 'Excuse me –'



'You too, miss.'

'No, listen –'

'This is a crisis situation, and –' The soldier, a captain by his insignia, grabbed Benny's arm, gently but firmly, and tried to send her in the direction of the swiftly dispersing crowd.

So Benny grabbed him by the epaulettes and swung him under her, into what, in other circumstances, would have been a pose straight off the front of one of Emily's books. 'Listen!' she bellowed. 'Those are not invaders up there, those are my wedding guests, and you are not to shoot them! Do you understand? Do you remember what you're here for? Wedding. Not war: wedding! Although the two concepts have become slightly blurred even in my own mind by the events of the last few days, I still hope that, should the ceremony actually happen, we can get through it without there being any actual *fatalities*!'

The last word was screamed with the force of somebody who had just got to the end of their tether and was being asked if they wouldn't mind going just a little bit further.

‘You’ve only got three bullets each anyway,’ the Doctor murmured, doffing his (now retrieved) hat kindly to the horizontal Captain. ‘That’s all you need for a twenty-one gun salute, but considerably fewer than required for a battle.’

It was at that point, with soldiers milling around, uncertain of their orders, and the platform still hovering, obviously waiting for a landing space to clear, that the Brigadier arrived, marching as straight and fast as his stick would carry him. ‘Ten- *shun*!’ he called, and Bernice could have sworn that even the man she was clutching stiffened. A silence fell across the troops. ‘Shoulder arms! What are they doing out anyway, did anybody order you to engage?

Well, did they?’

The troops were silent, standing stiffly under the shadow of the floating platform. Bernice marvelled at the spectacle. She swore that they wouldn’t have moved even if the craft above had opened fire. . .

The Brigadier paused for a second, sucking in his cheeks and nodding at the soldiers. He glanced at the Doctor. ‘Safe to let this thing land, I gather, Doctor?’

‘Oh yes. Could your soldiers clear a space?’

‘Of course.’ He glanced at the Captain in Bernice’s arms. ‘If you’ve finished enjoying yourself, Captain Traylen, have your men set up a perimeter ten metres clear of the platform. Safety catches on, and later we’ll have. . . a little chat. . . about this.’

Traylen leapt up from Bernice’s grasp. ‘Yes, sir.’ He started to order the men as the Brigadier had described.

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Bernice walked aside with the crowd and whispered in the Doctor’s ear:

‘Despite myself, I do like it when he does that.’

‘I’m very much afraid,’ said the Doctor, glancing back at his old friend, ‘that so do I.’

With UNIT’s assistance, the platform descended. As it came level with the crowd, they gasped again. Standing on it were five armoured, muscular reptiles, their hands gloved in metal clamps, ornate helmets

on their heads. Two of them were bulkier than the others, in green armour, and they were armed, carrying solid-looking rifles, obviously designed to fire some kind of energy bolt. But these were held across their chests in ceremonial fashion.

Between these two warriors stood three smaller, slimmer figures, all just as alien. These were clad in long red robes, their helmets and hand clamps also scarlet. Two of them carried caskets of gold. The figure in the centre was obviously their leader. He raised his claw and hissed, as the platform settled onto the ground.

‘ *Shsurr* Summerfield, I bring the greetings of all Mars upon the joyous occasion of your wedding!’

‘Savaar!’ Benny leapt on to the platform, and, to the obvious surprise of the guards, embraced the Ice Lord, kissing him on the scaly cheek. ‘When the Doctor told me he’d given you a time-jump device, I didn’t expect you to come this –’

‘Well armed?’ Savaar laughed, extending a claw towards the crowd. ‘For our part, we did not expect to land in so obvious a fashion. These are Ambassadors from the Martian Court, here to offer the blessings and gifts of the Grand Marshal himself. The ship will return to orbit, until you have need of our guard of honour. Believe me, *Shsurr* Summerfield, my Ice Warriors and I are here to *party*.’

The Brigadier, standing at the Doctor’s shoulder, raised an eyebrow. ‘I thought we were providing the guard of honour?’

‘UNIT on one side of the porch, Ice Warriors on the other,’ the Doctor murmured. ‘Altogether, I think that’s rather apt.’

134

Cheldon Bonniface Invitation Eleven

v

Doctor’s Invitation Eleven (40 overs)

Played at Cheldon Bonniface on 17 April 2010.

Doctor’s Invitation Eleven won by 4 runs.

Toss: Doctor’s Eleven.

*Doctor’s Invitation Eleven*

J. Kane

lbw b Cooke

4

J. Benton

c P. Hutchings b Cooke

2

B.S. Summerfield run out

39

H.O. Macbeth

c Miller b Cooke

12

I. Braxiatel

c Miller b P. Hutchings

7

Doctor

c Sinner b Smith

20

K. Pakhar

c Miller b Tasham

10

N. Li Shao

b Cooke

16

Sanki

c Burk b I. Hutchings

3

J.H. Watson

not out

5

S. Po

c Tasham b Cooke

3

Extras

19

TOTAL

140

*Cheldon Bonniface*

O

M R

W

P. Cooke

6.1 1

27 5

P. Hutchings

6

2

23 2

I. Hutchings

5

0

32 1

J. Smith

5

0

36 1

Tasham

6

1

22 1

135

*Cheldon Bonniface Invitation Eleven*

J. Miller

lbw b Doctor

2

G. Burk

c Li Shao b Kane

44

J. Bunney

c Doctor b Li Shao

16

M. Sinner

c Doctor b Li Shao

2

Tasham

c Summerfield b Sanki

5

P. Hutchings c Keri b Sanki

14

S. Seedman

c Sanki b Li Shao

2

J. Smith

c Keri b Watson

4

I. Hutchings

c Sanki b Li Shao

17

F. Kusinitz

c Watson b Sanki

10

P. Cooke

not out

4

Extras

16

TOTAL

136

*Doctor's Eleven*

O

M R

W

J. Kane

7

0

25 1

N. Li Shao

7.1 1

27 4

Sanki

5

0

28 3

J.H. Watson

8

1

37 1

Doctor

6

1

19 1

Umpires: Rev. A. Trelaw

L. Anders

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Oops! It's the Bishop

'Adulterer.'

'No!' Jason kicked over the laundry basket, and sat heavily down on the bed. 'I've explained about Carrie. You can go and ask her –'

'I phoned her up. All she did was giggle.'

'Because it's not important! She never even kissed me, just my collar!'

Bernice had gone straight from making sure that Savaar and his fellows had settled in, to see Jason, and had asked him directly, many times, if he was betraying her. She told him that she was not going to marry an adulterer.

She deserved better than that. She was worth more than that. She demanded absolute faithfulness, or this whole thing was off, and they would just go their separate ways. They couldn't even be friends. She couldn't stand that. Not now that he'd broken her heart.

He'd protested that none of this was true, so then she'd got specific. 'Why won't Dorothée talk to me about you? Why does she get nervous when I mention the subject?'

'I don't know. Maybe because. . . ' Jason put a hand to his chin, and stared for a long moment at the ground. 'Well, I suppose you're going to have to ask her about that.'

Bernice glared at him. 'What are you hiding?'

Jason shook his head, resigned. 'I can't say. But I can tell you that she and I have never made love.'

Benny leant back against the door. 'I believe you. But I don't know whether to be relieved or nervous about what you can't tell me.'

He met her eye. 'So you still trust your future husband?'

'No, absolutely not!' she shouted. She slapped her hand through the air, angry that her emotions had burst to the surface like that. 'Oh, I

don't know, I suppose I do. What about your activities in Tasham?'

Jason spread his arms wide. 'I have no idea about that. I've never even been there. From what you said, Chris and Ishtar might have overheard those women talking about anybody.'

'Anybody from space? In a big shirt?'

'The Doctor. . . has noted that coincidences are happening here.'

'It's not good enough, adulterer.'

He looked up at her again, in pain, and shrugged. 'It'll have to do.'

* * *

137

'What was the sequel to *King Kong*?'

Silence had fallen across the bar of the Black Swan. This was the night of the weekly pub quiz. Every Saturday, most of the village, even Mr Miller of the Time In A Bottle, when the man from the brewery wasn't in town, would gather at seven and play eight rounds of serious trivia.

Tonight, they were joined by a variety of guests from other worlds, and so the bar was packed as far as the door, with people sitting at the tables outside and watching through the windows.

Mr Miller was indeed there, promising everybody in whispers that tomorrow the aliens would be at his pub, and complaining that Sanki's claws were made to catch cricket balls. People believed both statements about equally.

O'Kelly Isley joined his brothers and the rest of their team, having returned from a brief inspection of the jukebox.

'Hey, they made a sequel to *Kong!* ' Rudolph told him.

'No. . . ' The Doctor looked troubled. 'I don't recall an actual sequel. And if there was, it would have been before your time. . . '

On the other side of the room, Lord Savaar's team sat in a (thankfully rather large) corner, the Ice Lord and his two Ice Warrior Lieutenants (the Ambassadors having returned to the ship) flanked by Bernice and Jason, who were seated a significant few feet apart.

‘How can a King have a sequel? If they mean an heir, would he not be Kong the Second?’ Savaar said, his pincer clamped around a pint of angostura bitters. After much experimentation, the Martians had settled on this as their favourite beverage from the bar, finding it both pleasant and intoxicating.

Bernice was equally puzzled. ‘Are they talking about a film or a book or something?’

‘A film.’ Jason clicked his fingers. ‘I know what they’re talking about. There wasn’t a sequel, but I know which movie they mean.’

‘This competition is so humanocentric,’ hissed Savaar.

‘And twentieth-century biased,’ Bernice added. ‘Lucky we’ve got Jason on our team.’

‘What about me?’ James the verger had returned from the bar with a tray of drinks including a whole pitcher of angostura. ‘I know about the modern world.’

‘But do you know what they think the sequel to *King Kong* is?’ said Jason, proudly.

‘I know about the modern world,’ repeated James, sitting down.

‘So you don’t know?’ Jason prodded him.

‘I know about the modern world,’ James insisted, pouring out the angostura for the Martians. ‘ *Mighty Joe Young* is an old movie.’



Jason looked deflated. ‘Damn.’

Bernice glanced into one of the other corners, where the UNIT teams were hunched over their piece of paper. Unsurprisingly, being from the same time and planet as the person who set the questions, they were doing quite well.

There were so many soldiers in the pub, even after several of them had wandered off for a quiet drink down the Time In A Bottle with the Brigadier and the other veterans, that they’d had to form several teams, but Bernice had the impression that they were sharing information. Cheats.

Skog, one of the Ice Warriors, stood up. ‘Excuse me,’ he hissed. ‘I shall return in a moment.’ He headed for the gents.

Bernice and Jason looked at each other, with just enough edge to commu-nicate their common thought, but nothing that Savaar would notice. Jason leant closer to Benny’s ear. ‘Shall I go and have a look, and tell you how they do it?’

‘Don’t be vulgar.’

‘But don’t you want to know?’

‘In theory, yes, but it may be too horrid. I’m amazed he can do anything in a moment in that suit.’

Bernice’s gaze followed the Martian as he approached the toilet. He threaded his way through the crowd at the bar, and encountered a UNIT soldier headed in the other direction, carrying a pint. Skog’s shoulder shunted him aside, and the pint went flying.

‘Hey!’ the soldier bellowed. ‘You spilt my pint!’

‘Yes,’ whispered Skog. ‘I did.’

Bernice realized that the Martian was just stating the obvious, that in a moment he would have offered to buy the Private another, but she also realized that it was too late.

The soldier head-charged the bulky alien, pushing him off balance. The Martian, reflexively, struck out with his claw, sending the soldier flying.

As one, the soldiers in the corner jumped to their feet, and ran at the Ice Warrior. Bernice realized that Savaar and his compatriots were getting to their feet also.

'Savaar,' she called. 'Don't! This is stupid!'

'Don't worry, *Shsurr* Summerfield,' the Ice Lord assured her. 'We won't hurt them.'

Jacquilian and Sanki had been at the bar, chatting in subdued voices with Annie Trelaw while the quiz progressed. Now they were astonished to find chairs and bottles flying as the soldiers and the Ice Warriors laid into each other, and the pub quiz turned into a pub brawl. Annie had started to shout and wave her arms, but she couldn't make herself heard over the noise.



'Ooh, what a palaver!' whistled Jacquilian. 'Do you think we should join in?''No, Jacs, no. Think of your digits. Your art must be above such things.'

'Sanki, you're so right. Mind you –' A soldier slammed into the bar beside them, and was about to get to his feet and rejoin the fray. Jacquilian's third eye glowed red for a second, and his head wobbled with exertion. The soldier sank into a heap, unconscious. 'It doesn't mean we can't do our part.'

The Doctor had run into the middle of the fight, calling for them to stop, seeing all his hopes dissolve into flying glass and splinters. 'If we fight like –'

A soldier was thrown straight at him, and sent him flying backwards, skidding across the polished floor like a Gallifreyan dodgem car. He impacted with the jukebox, which lit up, its illuminated surface shining down on him. A CD fell on to the plate and began to play Iggy Pop and Debbie Harry's version of 'Well, Did You Ever?' But the Doctor wasn't paying attention.

His eye had been caught by the track listing on the front of the box.

He stared at it in horror.

‘Oh no,’ he muttered.

Bernice and Jason sighed, and got to their feet.

‘There is part of me that would actually like to get involved,’ Bernice murmured.

‘Know what you mean. The last time I was in a really good pub brawl was on Squaxis. . . ’

‘And of course it would be something of a release, after all our troubles. . . ’

James looked at them in horror. ‘Hey, I hope you’re not thinking of adding to this. There’s nothing fun about violence.’

‘You’re right, James, we’ll just’ – Benny and Jason ducked and raised their hands as a UNIT soldier flew overhead; they helped him on his way – ‘help with negotiations.’

James watched as the, now a little happier, couple ran to pull soldiers off Savaar.

In the centre of the crowd, Kit was rolling his sleeves up. ‘Nah, I dunno whose side I’m supposed to be on,’ he confided to Cob. ‘I just close my eyes, stick my fist out, and there’s usually somebody on the other end of it.’

He did just that. There was a satisfying thump and a yowl. ‘See?’

Dorothée and Watson approached the pub along the back lane, enjoying a moonlight stroll.



‘And I must admit,’ Watson was concluding, ‘that I do feel considerable affection and admiration for Professor Summerfield. I think we’re cut of the same cloth. But please don’t tell her this; I rely on your confidence.’

‘Sure.’ Dorothée nodded. ‘But, listen, I think maybe you ought to do something about this. If she and Jason get married. . . well, I really worry about her.’

‘Is the man as much of a bounder as he seems?’

‘Let’s just say,’ Dorothée said, choosing her words carefully, ‘he thinks that monogamy is a sort of wood.’

She opened the door of the pub, thinking the noises from inside were louder than those you’d normally associate with a pub quiz. Inside, chaos reigned.

It looked as if two-thirds of the pub were struggling in a great mass in the middle of it, and the other third were in the air, about to land back in the mass.

‘Wicked,’ she whispered to herself.

‘Disgraceful,’ declared Watson. Then he noticed that Bernice was in the middle of the fray. ‘Bernice!’ he called. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll save you!’ He launched himself towards her.

Dorothée had been about to say that it didn’t look as though Bernice needed rescuing. She paused at the door, wondering if this was the sort of thing that she should really be considering doing these days. Well, she might get the chance to give Jason a slap or two. And slip off with him afterwards.

Thus contemplating, for a brief moment, the duality of her nature, the Artist Formerly Known As Ace followed Watson.

Annie was frantically gathering glasses and bottles off the bar, trying to take them out of the conflict. She wondered how Saul must be feeling: he was supposed to be projecting an atmosphere of peace and harmony across the village. She looked up from the brawl, and saw the Isley Brothers making their way out of the door, shaking their heads in shame.

Annie decided to head in that direction. Maybe she could usher some more people out, reduce the heat of the situation. Gingerly, she started to pick her way through the crowd.

‘This French champagne, so good for the brain.’ Bernice caught a flying bottle, glanced at its label and looked to Jason in horror, dropping it neatly into the voluminous pocket of her skirt.

‘Have you heard? It’s in the stars: next July we collide with Mars.’ Jason stuck a foot out and tripped a running soldier. ‘You’re right, I’m really enjoying myself. Want to wander off afterwards?’

‘Jason. . . ’ Bernice frowned as she pushed another soldier back in the general direction of the Ice Warriors. ‘You know that our physical relationship has ceased until I know that I can trust you.’

‘Umm, but if we made love again, we could rediscover trust, and love, which I think has gone missing a bit lately.’

Benny raised her eyebrows. ‘Well, whose fault is that?’

Jason lashed out and knocked a UNIT soldier over the bar. ‘Not mine! I haven’t been anything but faithful to you. You’re the one who’s listening to gossip. I have never met anybody so insecure.’

‘ *Insecure?* And you’re a model of confidence, are you?’

‘Compared to you, yes. You just can’t believe that anybody would be foolish enough to *stay with you*!’

‘I –’ Benny swallowed a little explosion of anger. ‘You absolute git! Of course I’m insecure. That’s why I need a man who’s absolutely faithful! Who understands the *concept*!’

‘A man *like me*!’ Jason prodded his chest.

The two raging lovers looked up, aware that things had become a bit quieter. A space in the fight had cleared around them.

‘You can come back,’ Bernice muttered. ‘Don’t be scared.’

At that moment, Watson appeared out of the crowd, grabbed Benny’s elbow, and pulled her off across the room. ‘Hang on!’ he cried. ‘We’ll be out of here in a moment!’

Jason was about to pursue them, when Dorothée grabbed his hand. ‘Go on, leave them to it. At least give her a chance to be happy. Come with me, instead.’

‘What?’ He stared at her as if they’d never been together. Horrified, and, worse, kind of disgusted, as though the idea was a complete shock.

‘It’s better for you, it’s better for her. You’re never going to stay with one woman. Just stay with me for a while. I got a big house that’s empty, and –’

‘Get away from me,’ he said it almost gently, as though she was an irritation, and tried to head after Benny.

So Dorothée hit him.

He spun aside and impacted with the shoulder of Savaar, who was batting aside two soldiers who were laying about him with chairs. The collision sent Savaar spinning like a windmill, knocking both soldiers aside. One of the chairs connected with the back of Skog’s head, sending that Ice Warrior tripping forward. He fell against the mass of fighting people, and started a wave that swept across the room. Soldiers and Ice Warriors fell in a toppling row.

* * *

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Annie was nearly at the door. She saw it starting to open. Somebody was trying to come in.

The wave of falling people raced up behind her, headed by a UNIT private with outstretched hands, who, caught at the ankles, was falling straight towards her, reaching for her to stop him from landing flat on his face.

The door swung open.

Standing there was a familiar figure in black. Rotund, peevish-looking and evidently appalled by what he saw.

The Bishop.

The soldier’s hands grabbed her. At the back of her leggings.

And pulled them straight down.

He hit the floor with a thump.

There was a moment’s silence.

The Bishop stared at the Reverend Annie Trelaw, standing there in her shirt tails.

Annie raised a finger. ‘I can explain.’

At the far wall, the Doctor sat in a corner by the jukebox, pondering the mysteries of time and space. While everybody’s attention was

distracted, he reached out a hand, and quietly pulled the machine's plug from the wall.

143

Knees Up, Mother Earth

'A sort of reverse butterfly effect,' Ishtar laughed, holding on to Chris's arm as the two of them stood talking with James by the altar. The last few parishioners were winding their way out of St Christopher's. The church had been packed, the visitors' glamour even rubbing off on Sunday-evening services.

'I think they all got caught up in the excitement,' said Chris.

Annie and the Bishop (who'd been sitting at the back that evening, looking quite forbidding) wandered over to join them, having seen the last villager out.

'I had heard reports of strange goings on in the village,' the Bishop told them. 'So I thought I'd better pop over. But when I saw the interior of that public house! Goodness! I thought we had reinvented Sodom and Gomorrah!

I think the explanation provided was the only one which wouldn't have had me talking about excommunication. . . '

'Well, the truth is strange,' said Annie. 'But thankfully, with all these aliens about, very easy to prove.'

Ishtar grinned. 'It's been a long time since I've seen a vicar with their trousers down.'

The Doctor was under the jukebox, his legs sticking out from the innards of the machine. The landlord had closed the pub down completely following the riot. Not only had the Doctor recompensed the man with a large bag of gold, but he'd been in and out of the place all Sunday, delivering fine Chippendale tables and rolling up his sleeves to sand down the floor and repolish it.

'It's not your fault,' Bernice had told him. 'You didn't even join in.' But he still felt responsible. The village had closed in on itself a little since the fight, and all the momentum of the cricket match had been lost. The Brigadier's promises that the men would be disciplined, and Savaar's public fast and atonement, wouldn't be enough to dampen down those old fears, now burning again.

And, of course, there was the matter of the jukebox.

A shadow had fallen over the Doctor. He pulled himself out from the machine and looked up.

O'Kelly Isley stood there. 'Hi, Doctor. Anything I can do?'

The Doctor grinned engagingly. 'No, not at all. I've nearly finished here.'



'The boss let me in. He doesn't look so upset.'

'He's probably contemplating buying the brewery.'

O'Kelly leant on the jukebox. 'You know, we got a song on this thing.'

The Doctor's face retained its fixed grin. 'Oh yes?'

'"Summer Breeze". Nice title. We ain't written it yet.'

'Ah, well, then you mustn't hear it.'

'What? Why not?'

'Because' – the Doctor sat up, holding a CD in his hand – 'if you hear it and remember it unclearly, you might then write the song differently, creating an alternate universe where the only difference, initially, is a single chorus in a single record. Creating alternate universes is very messy.'

'But how about if I write it down, memorize every detail?'

'Even worse. Then you haven't really written that song. You copied it down, but you weren't the person who wrote it originally. Such songs, books, poems, et cetera, are written by Time herself, and they contain messages. Sometimes the meaning of such messages is clear instantly, sometimes it takes centuries.'

He stood up, and glanced at the singer warily, chewing on a knuckle. 'Now Time, O'Kelly Isley, is fickle. A message in one of her texts might be there to cause great harm, a sort of curse. Sometimes, just sometimes, it's there for a positive reason. But I'd rather not take the chance. So' – he broke the disc with a snap of his fingers – 'don't listen to records you haven't written yet.'

He flipped another CD out of his pocket, and dived back under the machine.

A moment later, he re-emerged, dusting off his hands. ‘When in doubt, settle for Kate Bush.’

O’Kelly inclined his head, his eyes still full of wonder. ‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

Dorothée leant on the wall beside the telephone under the stairs at Mrs Higgins’s guest-house. She was talking to her mother, at length. ‘So there’s this guy, right? And we. . . went out together. . . and now he doesn’t even want to admit it. So I hit him, and now he won’t even talk to me. Thing is, he’s going out with. . . with one of my best friends. They’re going to get married. I know he’s going to hurt her, but how do I stop them?’ She stopped, listening as a long beep sounded from the receiver. Then, sighing, she replaced the receiver.

Answerphone tapes were so short.

James was standing at the bottom of the stairs when she emerged. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing,’ he said. ‘If you think that way, then you should really tell your friend about the situation.’

‘I’m going to.’ Dorothée walked straight past him. ‘Eventually.’

James waited there for a moment after she’d gone upstairs, and whispered to himself: ‘Tell your friend about the situation.’

* * *

146

Chris looked across the dinner table at Roz, grinning. She looked back at him impassively, deeply, darkly, embarrassed. ‘So nice of you to invite us along,’

she murmured.

Around the table also sat Ishtar, next to, but at a diplomatic distance from, her boyfriend; Sherlock Holmes, who was in genial mood, glancing around his fellows with anticipation; the Brigadier and Doris; and Watson. Emily Hutchings sat at the other end of the table, looking at Chris as if he’d just insulted her entire family and was continuing to do so.

Roz felt obliged to talk to her, since nobody else seemed to be talking at all.

'I hear you're writing a book. How's it going?'

'Well,' said Emily.

There was another silence.

'What's the subject matter?'

'Love.' It sounded like a curse.

'And in what way is this love recounted? Are we talking romantic love, love in a historical context, or the love, for instance, of family or friends?'

Emily stared at her. 'Do I have the right to remain silent? It's a romance, yes, but unlike my previous books, this also has a theme, some intellectual depth. It's based on a real relationship, and I think it's the best thing I've ever written. Satisfied?'

Roz let her hands drop into her lap. 'No further questions.'

'Emily's a really good writer,' Ishtar piped up.

'Don't try to flatter me,' Emily snapped. 'You're just trying to get round me about bringing your. . . friend to dinner.'

'Mr Hutchings, ah, did ask me. . . ' said Chris.

'Perhaps. But I didn't.'

Peter hurried in, carrying a steaming nut roast. He placed it on the table quickly, and then jumped back, sucking his fingers.

'Oh.' Doris smiled. 'That looks lovely!'

'I'm sure it tastes just like the real thing,' muttered the Brigadier, raising an eyebrow dubiously.

'A magnificent spectacle, Mr Hutchings,' smiled Holmes. 'But tell me, have you received the item of electrical post that I was expecting?'

'Not yet.' Peter started cutting up the roast and delegating portions. While he did so, Roz realized that he wasn't quite able to look her partner in the eye.

‘I’ve set the system so that if my mailbox gets anything from the address you mentioned, we’ll hear a bell.’

‘Very good,’ said Holmes, and set about his nut roast.

Dorothée blinked.

She was sitting on top of the wardrobe in her room, with – she felt them 147

with her hands – three dusty and spiderwebbed hats on her head.

She realized she must have got them from the wardrobe itself, because the door was flapping open.

Feeling scared, but at the same time very stupid, she climbed down and looked in the wardrobe. Just a wardrobe. Clothes and stuff inside.

She replaced the hats.

She closed the door.

She went and sat on the edge of the bed. ‘What?’ she asked herself.

Bernice was going to go and have a chat with Saul, so she’d made her way to St Christopher’s Church this Sunday evening, waiting until the last parishioner had left before approaching the gate. In less than a week, she’d be married.

If only she had the courage just to call the whole thing off. Then she could really find out about Jason. Or just run off with Watson.

Where had that thought come from?

The Victorian gentleman had rushed her out of the bar, and back to the guest-house, but, charmingly, had insisted on making her tea in the kitchen, rather than in his room. There was something very attractive, at this point, in a man who was so supernaturally reliable. But she’d never considered herself to be seriously attracted to him. Before now. . . Damn!

The church gate was garlanded with flowers and little silver charms. Bernice wondered for a second who had put them there, and then saw, on the other side of the road, a ragged collection of individuals. Some of them had dreadlocks, some of them wore tattoos and face paint. They stood there as if waiting for her.

Bernice gasped, delighted to find them here, surprised to see them stand up and approach her, suddenly feeling full of magic.

Above the church, a full moon was rising.

Máire, Cook William and Alec Without Gloves were around her now, shaking her hand, kissing her, and embracing her. Máire still had a Dalek gun hanging from the belt of her dress, and she'd aged well, with laughter lines around wise eyes.

Máire stepped back and looked at Bernice. 'The Goddess has been good to you, Benny.'

'And you, Máire, blessed be.'

'Good she may have been, but I've gotten old.'

'I didn't actually think you were still alive,' Benny laughed. 'Dorothée kept on about losing you.'

'She lost her to the old religion,' Cook William piped up. 'Wire went off and did some violence with Ace for a while, but in the end she had to come back to us and be our Priestess. I'm the Priest now. Which is why we're here.'



'The Doctor brought us across early,' Máire added, 'because we told him that, if you were going to get married, we wanted you to do it our way.'

'Your way? What, a handfasting?'

'You remembered.'

'Well, I was present when Daniel and Lucas were hand-fasted.'

'Yes, but with all the ale you put down that day, I'm still surprised that you remember.'

Bernice threw her head back and laughed. 'It's great to see you all again, but. . . listen, I'm not so sure about this wedding business. I thought I had a week to be certain. . . '

'The good thing about our way,' Máire assured her, taking her arm, 'is that you get to discover your true intentions towards each other. This would-be husband of yours around, is he?'

‘Unless he’s off bonking Tasham, then probably. Why, do you want to meet him before the handfasting?’

‘You could say that. You see, we have to do this on the last full moon before your Christian wedding.’

‘Well, that would be. . . ’ Bernice stopped, and looked up. ‘Ah. I see.’

‘And then the suspect started shouting “No, not the mind probe!”. Well, it was only a traffic offence. We fell about.’ Chris looked around the stony faces at the table. ‘Well, maybe you had to be there.’

‘Oh yes, very good. . . ’ the Brigadier murmured, casting a baffled glance at Doris.

Holmes clapped his hands together and barked a sharp laugh. ‘Delicious!

You seem much better informed than the police of our day. Don’t they, Watson?’

‘Eh?’ Watson looked up from the sad contemplation of his dessert. ‘Sorry, Holmes, I was miles away.’

‘My dear Watson, I’m sure the lady in question is set in her course, whatever advice you may have offered her.’

‘But Holmes, how –?’

Roz cut in, raising her hand. ‘I think that we all know what this is about.

Bernice’s strange decision to fall in love with somebody who’s obviously wrong for her.’

‘Oh, the subject of the moment,’ Emily murmured frostily.

‘Actually, I rather wanted to hear how Sherlock worked that out. . . ’ Peter began. But it was too late. Roz was glaring at Emily.

‘Why is it the subject of the moment? What other doomed romance are we talking about?’

‘Uh, Roz. . . ’ Chris warned.

Emily's eyes locked with Roz's. 'My daughter is being very young and stupid about your partner, you know. And he's encouraging her.'

'If he is, it's because he has romantic feelings for her.'

'Oh really? So he doesn't do this every time you land?'

'He's the best man I know and he doesn't hurt women, if that's what you mean.'

'Oh, so you know?'

Roz's lip curled slightly in contempt. 'You're lucky I don't have a temper, Mrs Hutchings. That's a very uninformed point of view.'

'I was just thinking, the other day. . . ' began the Brigadier, trying to start a new conversation.

'Isn't it strange,' Ishtar observed acidly, 'how both me and Chris have other people fighting over us?'

From upstairs, a bell rang out.

Holmes sprang to his feet. 'Mr Hutchings,' he cried. 'Show me the message.'

As Holmes and Peter ran up the stairs, Doris whispered in the Brigadier's ear. 'I won't make the obvious comment.'

Bernice and the Travellers went about the village, gathering up the people they needed. Jason was led from the Time In A Bottle, muttering: 'Oh, so you're planning to marry me now, are you?' The Doctor was, of course, waiting in the guest-house dining room, clutching a bunch of flowers, which he handed to Bernice with a little raising of his hat.

'All quite spontaneous then, this handfasting business?' Bernice asked him.

'Ah, it depends what you mean by spontaneous.'

Benny looked at him for a long moment. 'And what you mean by devious.'

Máire took Jason and Benny by the hand, and kissed each of their palms.

Now we need an elder female figure to partner the Doctor. . . ’

‘Annie wouldn’t be keen, would she?’ Bernice murmured.

‘Emily?’ Jason asked.

‘OK.’ Benny reached out and looped her fingers into Jason’s hand, at which he smiled giddily, and looked at her with great puppiness. ‘This is going to be a test,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t get too excited.’

‘I shall pass any test,’ he muttered determinedly, which evoked a rather soppy smile from Benny.

‘And someone of your sexual preference each, somebody that you really trust,’ Wire finished.

Jason looked blank.

‘This may be a problem,’ Benny told the Travellers.

* * *

150

The frosty atmosphere in the Hutchingses’ dining room had been shattered as Holmes sprinted downstairs, leaping the last few steps and grabbing his cloak from the coat pegs. ‘Watson!’ he cried. ‘We are once more on the heels of a mystery! Officers, if you wish to accompany us. . . ’

Doris reacted as she saw Alastair getting to his feet, but he held her gaze with a determined look for a moment. ‘If Hamlet Macbeth can chase around with torches,’ he told her, ‘then I can help out with a mystery.’

‘Alastair,’ she muttered angrily. Then she threw her hands up. ‘Go on.’

‘Room for one more?’ the old soldier asked Holmes.

‘The more the merrier!’ called Holmes. ‘Mr Hutchings, may we borrow your car?’

Peter threw him the keys. ‘Who’s going to drive?’

‘Electric car? I can do that.’ Roz had got to her feet and was swiftly checking her weapons. She glanced at Chris and saw that he was happily taking another helping of stuffing. ‘Come on.’

‘No, you go on. I’m sure it’s nothing important.’

Roz was about to order him to come with her, but then suddenly wondered if she could do that any more. Chris certainly looked set for the night, despite Emily’s bemused glare. Roz shrugged. ‘Fine, partner. Have a nice night.’

‘You too!’ Chris called. Even Ishtar was now looking at him in puzzlement.

Holmes flung open the door. ‘Follow me!’ he cried.

Keri was wandering in the woods, enjoying the new scents and trails of an alien world. The little animal noises and the sigh of the trees in the low breeze were very relaxing. She wished she had her camera, but that would have meant bringing Kitai along too, and that would have been not relaxing at all.

Every now and then a sneeze would well up inside her, but then she’d concentrate and force it down again. She wanted this to be a pure experience, not a fantasy.

In the distance, she saw a familiar figure. It was James, she was sure. The verger was talking to somebody in a clearing, lit by moonlight, and the conversation appeared to be very animated, at least on the part of the unknown individual.

Something, Keri didn’t know what, made her stop and move into the shadow of a tree. She couldn’t quite make out who the other person was, though she was pretty certain it was a human male. He was dressed all in black.

She took in a little air, realizing that she’d been holding her breath, and inhaled some pollen. She tried to hold it for a second, but then –

*Choo*!

151

Keri wiped her eyes with her paw, feeling disorientated. Was this the real world or not?

At the Time In a Bottle, Kadiatu was enjoying a lime cordial with Ruby Duvall.

‘And we’ve been working together ever since,’ Ruby was saying.

‘Okay, so he’s blustery, and he sees aliens everywhere, well, before there *were* aliens everywhere, but he’s got a good heart.’

‘So it seems.’ Kadiatu inclined her head. ‘But sometimes the. . . extremities of emotion that truly organic life forms allow themselves. . . I think having a drone around gives you a different perspective on that.’

‘Glad I’m good for something,’ muttered the owl sitting on the back of her chair.

‘All in all –’ Kadiatu continued. Then she stopped, staring at Ruby. ‘Ruby, why are you doing that?’

Ruby, without comment, had crawled under the table, and was knocking on the underside in a strange staccato pattern.

‘Ruby?’ Kadiatu looked under the table, and saw her drinking partner concentrating on the task with quiet determination.

She sat up again, wondering if this was something else that humans did.

She glanced across the pub. Everything was suddenly quiet.

Because everybody else was silent, still as statues, frozen in motion. There was only the frantic, random tapping from under the table.

Kadiatu slid her gun from its holster, and glanced up at aM!xitsa. ‘Any strange fields or beams?’

The owl shook its head. ‘Astonishingly, no.’

Emily watched Chris finishing his coffee. ‘Why did you want to stay?’ she asked.

‘Just enjoying the meal.’ Chris shrugged.

‘I think that’s very sweet,’ Ishtar concluded. ‘A lot of guys would have fled at the first opportunity, Emily.’

‘Chance would be a fine thing. Well, since you’re determined to go through with this, Mr Cwej.’

‘Hey, you pronounced it right! Nobody does that!’

Emily curled her lip a fraction. ‘What, people call you Kwedge?’

‘Friends call me Chris.’

Emily paused for a beat. ‘So, Mr Kwedge –’

Doris coughed, awkwardly.

‘Emily,’ Peter warned. ‘Now you’re just being rude.’

‘Well, Mr Kwedge is what we used to call a dirty old man,’ Emily muttered.

‘Why should I be nice to him? Oh, there’s the doorbell.’ She got up before 152

Ishtar could shout something at her. Chris just took Ish’s hand and shook his head. Peter mimed apologies.

At the door were Bernice’s party, looking for all the world like a ragged group of carol-singers.

‘Emily, hi,’ Benny began. ‘It’s a nice night. We just thought you might fancy a bit of pagan worship.’

Peter’s car shot along the narrow country roads, mud spinning from its wheels as the powerful electrical engine propelled Holmes’s party through the night.

Roz’s driving style was rough and fast, and the car was definitely going to need a good wash after the evening’s adventure.

‘This is splendid, eh, Watson?’ Holmes called from the front seat. ‘If only we could take one of these back home!’

Watson was holding on in the back beside the Brigadier, terrified. ‘Capital, Holmes, capital,’ he spluttered.

The car shot past a sign indicating the entrance to Steel Farm, and, following a bumpy chase down a driveway, screeched to a halt in a swirl of gravel before an elegant floodlit house.

Holmes jumped out, followed by Watson and Roz, both with weapons ready.

The Brigadier marched after them, his stick in hand. ‘I’ll catch up,’ he told them, panting slightly. ‘Don’t slow down on my account.’

Holmes marched up the steps and knocked imperiously on the door.

Beside him, Roz quickly pressed the doorbell, earning herself a wry smile from the Great Detective.

The door opened. A startled-looking butler stood there.

‘I am Sherlock Holmes!’ Holmes purred.

‘And I’m Lord Tebbit!’ replied the butler. He slammed the door.

Holmes stepped back, and, with a sudden swing of his body, kicked the door. It flew open.

The adventurers sped in, past the astonished butler. Holmes glared at him as they passed. ‘I would expect better manners from one of the nobility.’

Bernice’s party had assembled in the street, Emily pulling on her coat. ‘I hope this isn’t going to take long,’ she muttered. ‘Peter’s no use with him, and I don’t want to leave Ishtar with that man.’

‘That man?’ The Doctor frowned. ‘Oh, you mean Chris. He’s very sweet, really. For a policeman.’

‘Erm, trusted others?’ suggested Bernice, wanting to stop Emily and the Doctor arguing. ‘I’d like Savaar. And what about’ – a wicked thought crossed her mind – ‘Dorothée for Jason? If we’re going to sort out this trust business –’

‘Dorothée?’ Jason looked aghast. ‘I’d. . . well. . . There must be. . . ’



‘Good!’ The Doctor rubbed his hands together. ‘Come on, let’s get them.’

Jason hung back from the others to have a quiet word with Máire. ‘Dorothée and I. . . we’re. . . well, she hit me last time I saw her.’

Máire looked at him penetratingly. ‘Then this will be good. A reconciliation.’

‘She. . . wants me to run off with her.’

To his surprise, the Travellers laughed. ‘Perfect!’ Alec called.

‘And the Ice Warrior’s going to be priceless,’ William chuckled.

Jason raised an eyebrow. For religious fanatics, this lot seemed disturbingly jolly.

Ishtar and Chris sat on the sofa, with Peter opposite. He was drawing a dia-gram in the air, and Ish was looking bored, but Chris was rapt with attention.

Doris looked as if she was pretending to follow, but was actually thinking of something rather more interesting. She showed no sign of concern at her husband's adventuring.

'And so if you look at it in six dimensions. . . '

'Yeah!' Chris clicked his fingers. 'That's fascinating.'

Ish was relieved when there was another ring at the doorbell. She ran to open it.

Standing there was O'Kelly Isley. 'Sorry to bother you good people, but I'm just asking around. Do you guys own any of our records? Maybe a Greatest Hits collection?'

Dorothée held on to Máire for several minutes. 'Bona, bona to vada. . . '

Dorothée laughed. 'Thought I'd never see you again, *ma petite*. Are you lot here for the wedding?'

'Immediately,' Máire laughed, letting go of Dorothée. 'We need you to help Jason.' They were all standing in the street outside Mrs Higgins's.

Jason stepped forward, his hands raised in surrender. 'Don't hit me,' he said.

Holmes strode into an elegant conservatory, centred upon a vast fireplace.

Before it stood Alec Steel, Lord Tasham, in a black silk robe He didn't look up from the glass of brandy he was sipping, but simply gestured to several empty chairs. 'Ah, Brigadier, Mr Holmes. How delightful of you to visit. Do sit down.'

'Thank you.' Holmes sat down, and indicated to the others to do the same.

'Your Lordship, I shall come straight to the point. I am aware of no fewer than thirty crimes you have committed. Possibly more.'

Tasham turned to regard him, a wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth. ‘Are you indeed? How very interesting. . . ’

* * *

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Kadiatu had been going from table to table, gently pinching and slapping the frozen figures, trying to wake them up. The owl flapped around the inn also, doing quick medical scans on everybody. It seemed that, aside from being frozen, all were normal, or whatever was normal for their various alien biologies.

Then, as Kadiatu was clicking her fingers in front of Lisa Deranne’s face, the woman’s eyes moved, swinging suddenly upwards. She started to move, and, for a moment, Kadiatu thought her attempts at waking the sleepers had worked. All over the pub, they were getting to their feet, putting down drinks, heading for the door.

All with the same glazed expression on their faces.

Grimly, Kadiatu and aM!xitsa followed them.

‘I am honoured to be chosen, *Shsurr* Summerfield.’ Savaar bowed. The Travellers and the handfasting party were making their way up a little lane to the top meadow, where Máire had told them they’d made camp.

Emily looked dubiously at the Priestess as she kissed her palm and then Dorothée’s. Dorothée appeared to have some prior knowledge of what this meant, as she licked her lips afterwards. ‘What does this handfasting ritual actually involve, then?’

‘Well’ – Máire looked up at the moon above and stretched her arms into a spire – ‘for a start, let’s just say that I’m glad it’s a warm night.’

‘Oh, bloody hell.’ Emily turned and looked at the Doctor, and the Ice Warrior. ‘Surely not?’

O’Kelly Isley sat before the Hutchingses’ hi-fi, notepad in hand, his head bobbing to the sound of ‘Summer Breeze’ while Peter, Chris, Doris and Ishtar watched, entranced.

After it was over, he took a moment to finish his notes, and then smiled, relieved. ‘Sounds harmless to me.’

‘It’s one of my favourite songs of yours,’ Peter told him. ‘“Summer Breeze, makes me feel fine, blowing through the jasmine in my mind. . . ”’

‘Odd lyric,’ Chris laughed. ‘What did you mean by that?’

O’Kelly shook his head happily. ‘I begin to see,’ he told them, ‘what the Doctor was talking about.’

‘From the turn of the century onwards’ – Holmes had got up to stride back and forth across the room – ‘you have been known as a hero of the Reconstruction, moving your vast network of farms, both here and in Germany, towards organic and atmosphere-replenishing work methods. And yet, Lord Tasham, you harbour a dark secret.’



‘Indeed?’ Tasham still seemed unmoved.

‘Professor Summerfield shared with my colleague Dr Watson the few words you said to her when she was keeping wicket behind you. They included references to what the Doctor’s expected actions might be. Mr Hutchings informs me that you have a great interest in the police box that stands on the village green. Moreover, an *informed* interest. The obvious conclusion is that you know the Doctor, but he has shown no sign of knowing you.’

‘I see. . . ’ muttered the Brigadier, grimly.

Lord Tasham raised his hands, as if caught out on a white lie. ‘Let us say that myself and the Doctor have. . . mutual friends.’

‘I’m feeling a bit odd,’ Emily muttered.

The Doctor grinned at her. ‘Well, we have had subatomic dataconnectors applied to our skin.’

‘Eh?’

‘Máire kissing our palms. Microscopic computers passed through our pores, and are whizzing about our systems now, connecting to the neurons.’

‘Oh. . . ’ Emily blinked.

‘And, of course, we are standing naked in a muddy field.’

‘That too. Doctor, is this magic? Because it feels like magic.’

‘Call it what you want,’ the Doctor murmured, his eyes looking at something distant and mysterious.

In the centre of the field, the Travellers had drawn a complex maze, and Bernice and Savaar and Jason and Dorothée were standing at different entrances to it. All were naked. Savaar’s skin, under his armour, had also been dyed a ceremonial red, Bernice had been surprised to discover.

She glanced over at Emily and the Doctor. While Emily was covering herself up with her hands, the Doctor looked quite unconcerned, and thus not particularly naked. The umbrella that he still had slung over his shoulder helped.

As for her, well, she didn’t like the fact that Jason could now make a direct comparison between her bumps and droopings and Dorothée’s muscular voluptuousness. But it felt good to be part of the Travellers’ faith again, and, as the devices in her bloodstream changed her perception, she realized more and more that this ceremony might actually bring some trust to her and Jason.

‘Your attendants are every other potential mate,’ Máire began. ‘If you wish to be only with each other after your handfasting, then they are your last lovers.’

Jason glanced at Dorothée, worried, but as Bernice quickly noted, not exactly unwilling. Bernice herself felt the softness of Ice Warrior skin on her 156

shoulder. The honour of an Ice Lord removing his armour in her presence was, in itself, staggering. ‘ *Shsurr* Summerfield,’ Savaar hissed. ‘If you would rather –’

‘Erm, no, don’t worry about it.’ Benny patted his hand quickly. ‘We’ll sort something out, I’m sure. Since we’re, ah, obliged to.’

Holmes stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘Mutual friends?’

‘A couple, young people. They’re called Vincent and Justine,’ said Tasham.

‘Really?’ Roz narrowed her eyes. ‘This is going to be interesting.’

‘Those two had a very big effect on me. They. . . changed my opinion

on quite a few subjects.'

'Indeed.' Holmes rose to his feet and leant on the fireplace beside the nobleman. 'As they confirmed to me via e-mail this very evening.'

'They did?' Tasham looked surprised for the first time.

'Perhaps you would care to tell us about the thirty-three drums of Bloom which even now sit, unused, in the cellar of this very building?'

'But Holmes –!' cried Watson.

The Great Detective raised his hand. 'A trifle, Watson. Now, your Lordship, do you wish to make a clean breast of this whole affair?'

Slowly, Tasham nodded. The Brigadier, on impulse, stood up, and strode over to the nobleman. Quickly, he reached out.

And pulled his beard.

'Ow,' said Tasham.

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow. 'Oh well. You never know.'

The maze was a twisting white tube, made of chalky soil, or sometimes something organic, as if Bernice was inside a body. The Goddess had embraced her, and led her into Puterspace. The connections now, Benny realized, were much better than they had been on Heaven.

Beside her was Savaar, looking passive, his slim red arms locked across his chest in ritual supplication. The fast he had been on had made him utterly receptive to the intelligent poisons rushing around his reptile brain.

'We are nearing the place where we will meet them,' he told her.

'Who?' Bernice asked.

'The gods. And the dead ones.'

A sudden shock convulsed Bernice, and she found herself struggling, trying to swim against the all-encompassing tide. 'The dead ones? Who?'

'The ones you expect.' Savaar smiled, his tiny teeth glinting pink against the white walls flashing by as the two of them sped down the

winding tunnel.

He looked as if he was enjoying this. ‘I am dust in the wind,’ he said.

* * *

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‘Whee!’ Dorothée yelled, pulling Jason after her. ‘Let’s go and see the dead ones!’

‘What dead ones?’ Jason asked, trying to touch the walls of the maze. ‘And, listen, there are things I have to ask you about.’

‘Don’t be stupid!’ Dorothée whispered. ‘If you try and ask here, and be all left-brain and stuff, then it’ll all start breaking down, and you’ll find yourself back in the field. So don’t.’

‘Okay.’ Jason shrugged.

Kadiatu and aM!xitsa followed the mass of zombies down the street, walking cautiously amongst them. They seemed to be heading for the church.

The sleepwalkers congregated around the church boundary. One of them –

it was actually Cob – lifted his leg to climb over.

Kadiatu stared as the sleepwalking humans all headed for the wall.

The dark figure thrust something into James’s chest.

The verger fell to his knees, and then to the ground. The figure put something to his head. It looked like a weapon.

Keri broke out of cover and ran forward, oblivious of the danger. ‘Stop!’ she shouted. ‘Don’t!’

Ahead, there came a flash of light. The dark figure turned and sprinted off, faster than Keri’s legs could carry her.

When she reached the clearing, there was no sign of anybody or anything.

Only the dusty ground and the shrubs. If James had been shot, or stabbed or something, then his body had vanished.

Keri put a paw to her face, wondering if it had all been a hallucination.

The sleepwalkers stopped, halted in mid-step, Cob halfway over the wall.

Annie Trelaw ran out on to the porch, and looked at the mass of dull-eyed figures. ‘Hey!’ she cried. ‘What in blazes do you think you’re up to?’

The sleepwalkers looked at each other, animated again. Cob lowered his leg, embarrassed. ‘We. . . were just out for a walk.’ He shrugged.

‘Such a nice evening,’ Kim commented.

‘Quite a luxury, having the moon so near the planet,’ Braxiatel muttered.

Kadiatu looked uneasily around them. ‘And then I woke up,’ she muttered to the drone, ‘and it had all been a dream. . . ’

The Doctor was introducing Emily to some old friends. ‘Time, Death, Pain. . .

Emily. Emily. . . Time, Death, and Pain.’

‘Hello again, Grandmother,’ said Time, curtsying formally at Emily’s feet.



Emily took her silvery hand, shocked. ‘What?’

The Doctor patted her on the shoulder. ‘I’ll explain later. Probably.’

Bernice heard Jason’s voice echoing down the maze. ‘No,’ he was saying.

Bernice herself was wrapped and supported in Savaar’s embrace. They’d been like that. . . possibly forever. Savaar was following some kind of internal ritual to the letter, kissing gently as each stage of it passed.

‘Now I am Guy,’ he said.

‘Goodbye, Guy,’ she said, kissing him again.

‘Now you have to decide,’ he said.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘Couldn’t we just stay here kissing?’

‘No,’ Jason told Dorothée.

She was wrapped around him, and he was almost crying.

She put a hand to his cheek. ‘I am –’

‘You are not. I don’t want you.’

Dorothée laughed. ‘Then don’t have me. Go on, off you go into the centre, meet the dead.’

She watched him go, drifting off like a balloon. ‘Phwoar!’ she called after him, laughing even more.

The Doctor introduced Emily to her own mother, who was sheltering under Death’s cape, looking small and a little lost.

‘Mum?’ asked Emily, pulling up the cape a little to peer in.

‘Emily!’ barked the old lady. ‘Are you still seeing that hippy? Him and his sums, as if sums can put bread on the table! And cover yourself, girl, you’re naked!’

Emily let the cape flop back down, and stood looking at the Doctor, her hands on her hips. ‘Oh, bloody hell. Any of your lot in here?’

‘My lot?’

‘Your annoying relatives.’

The Doctor looked as if he was about to grin and answer in the negative.

But then a look of horror came over his face. ‘It can’t be. . . ’ he murmured.

Then he bolted off. ‘Come on!’

Emily waved to Death, Time and Pain, and sprinted after him.

‘Later,’ said Time.

‘Be seeing you,’ said Death.

‘Ouch,’ said Pain, and nudged her sister in the ribs.

* * *

159

‘Torture!’ whispered Gerhardt. ‘Why, they should not have done that.’

‘Good of you to understand.’ Bernice hugged the young soldier. ‘In the circumstances.’

‘Well, for me to be angry at you, I would have to be unhappy, and I am not.

I went to Heaven like good soldiers do, and have been walking in the garden with Mother Mary.’

‘Hmm.’ Benny kissed his brow. ‘Questions of hell do arise in my case, then, don’t they?’

‘No.’ Gerhardt looked quite angry. ‘No, they do not. I shall hear no talk about that, I would never allow it.’

‘Oh.’ Benny smiled. ‘Great.’

Jason screamed and sped along the darkening tunnel, ducking past what he thought to be a tube train coming the other way. He leapt into a side tunnel, and found himself in the litter-filled corner of a building. The corner was piled high with corpses.

Jason panted and ran on.

In a distant field, Alec Without Gloves gently put his hand to Jason’s neck and felt his pulse. Dorothée had sprawled away from him now, and was giggling to herself, mumbling things like: ‘No, Jarvis, no. . . ’

Alec sat back on his haunches, undecided.

Bernice stood in the Centre, beneath the Tree, beneath the Sky, and she saw that there was a fruit hanging from the Tree.

She picked it, certain and sure, and she waited.

Jason ran into the Centre, weeping.

Bernice immediately took a bite from the fruit and offered it to him.

He ran up to her, and made to grab the fruit.

She stopped him. Calmed him. Offered him the fruit again.

This time he stepped back, uncertain, agonized.

Then he held his hand out, certain. She gave him the fruit. And he bit into it, and started to laugh, the juices running down his chin.

The arms of the Goddess enwrapped them both again, and the Tree and the Sky started to fade. The Goddess's hand softly drifted across their arms, and began to wrap them together, bound by something gentle.

The Doctor and Emily stood before a butterfly gate that had opened inside the curves of the Goddess.

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Through the gate was galloping a horse. No, not a horse – a single horn protruded from the beast's forehead. Something gleamed on the horn. And the unicorn had a rider.

'How has he. . . how is this. . . ?' The Doctor was waving his arms about like a windmill in a hurricane.

The rider came fully into view. It was a plump little old man in a long white robe, with a mass of grey hair, streaked with red. As he approached, the scene started to fade. 'Ah, Doctor,' he called. 'I did it! I found a way!'

Alec put his hands on Máire's shoulders, and started to rub them in a rhythmic pattern. Beside her, William stirred, sighing placidly as he opened his eyes.

Máire gave a satisfied groan and woke up. 'How are they?' she asked.

'Varied,' Alec replied. On this side of the maze pattern, which was now obscured and muddled by the movement of many bodies across it, Jason and Dorothée lay apart, both coming to with groans and swearwords. On the other side, Bernice and Savaar lay curled together, laughing.

On the other side of the field, the Doctor and Emily had stood up already.

And were talking to a man on a unicorn.

Máire leapt to her feet and put a hand to her mouth. She started to laugh.

‘William, my dear, we excelled ourselves that time!’

The Doctor looked up at Muldwych, his arms folded. ‘So how’s Antykhon?’

‘I wouldn’t know any more,’ the little man said as he hopped off the unicorn and patted its mane. ‘Since I have now escaped that place for good.’

‘How?’

‘A narrow beam of chronons, aligned perfectly with the marginal plane of reality established by these good people with their Puterspace apparatus. I picked him up on the way.’ He indicated his mount. ‘I think he comes from another marginal reality. Quite a coincidence. I think there may be a Fortean Flicker at work somewhere.’ He glanced at Emily. ‘Or, to put it another way: magic.’

He slipped something off the unicorn’s horn and handed it to the Doctor.

‘That’s half of my fee for you letting me stay here.’ The Doctor took the item gingerly from Muldwych’s hand, careful not to touch the other man’s flesh.

He held it up to the light. It was a brilliant metal ring. A moment later, there was a flash, and it split into two versions of itself.

The Doctor tossed the two rings in his palm. ‘Time rings? Where did you get these?’

Muldwych sighed. ‘As if I could tell you. The other thing is this.’ He unlocked a saddlebag and produced a parcel, wrapped in brown paper and string. ‘This is for you, not to be opened until after the wedding.’



The Doctor took the parcel, with similar care. ‘Thank you. I was wondering where I was going to get the rings.’

‘So will you let me stay?’

The Doctor slowly smiled. ‘As if I have a choice.’

Across the field, Jason stalked up to Bernice and Savaar, who were still wrapped together, and touched the Ice Lord's back with the toe of his newly replaced boot. A long, green cord was bound around Jason's wrist, and the other end was attached to Benny's.

'Excuse me. May I just say something to Bernice?'

'Of course.' Savaar let go and got to his feet, helping Bernice up. 'I shall retrieve my armour. It was an honour, *Shsurr* Summerfield.'

'As it was for me.' Bernice brushed earth from her breasts, and looked at Jason expectantly. 'Well?'

He took her in his arms, reeling her in by the cord. 'So, do you trust me?'

Bernice glanced across the field to where Dorothée was pulling on her leggings. 'Yes.'

'So will you marry me after all?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' He took her in his arms.

From across the field, Dorothée paused in getting dressed, troubled. For everything they had learnt in the embrace of the Goddess, she knew what she and Jason had done.

And, as James had said, she was going to have to tell Benny.

162

Yes, They're Back!

The TARDIS stood in the moonlight on the village green.

Then, with a great creaking and sputtering and screeching, an exactly similar police box appeared beside it, except that it was a foot off the ground.

With a great crash, the police box fell to earth. There was silence for a second.

The door opened, and an insect limb poked out – swiftly followed by several insect legs.

With a great whooping and whistling, a cluster of man-size insects burst out of the other TARDIS, and started smacking their limbs together in expressions of shared glee. A couple of them turned back to the police box, and started brushing it down with their antennae, flicking away the last traces of tar.

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The Adventure of the

Curious Landowner,

Chapter Three

**A reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD**

Lord Tasham, his expression now full of the ease that confession brings, handed us all a glass of brandy, and, abandoning his posture of superiority, sat with us. He took a deep breath, and began his most sad story.

‘I was entirely the kind of villain, Mr Holmes, that your line of business involves you with. I gather that you are real, and not some fictional character that the Doctor has seen it fit to place amongst us?’

‘I am the genuine article,’ replied Holmes. ‘So far as there is one.’

‘Good. For I was also the genuine article. Selfish, in love with my own money, hard on those opposed to me. The last few years were designed for such a creature as I. Dark, they were, and full of impending destruction. The technology that was to free us instead enslaved us, and I made sure that I was master amongst slaves. How wrong I was, how wrong.’

Officer Forrester placed a tender hand on the distraught man’s arm. ‘Please, tell us what occurred,’ she urged gently.

‘I had achieved my wealth and greatness at the expense of others, and was one of the richest men on the planet. My farms were run as factories, great pens of animals, tended by machines. Fields full of mutated, chemically altered crops, sucking the goodness from the soil.’ He looked on the verge of tears. ‘My life was changed when I met Vincent and Justine. They were on the other side of a barricade at a farming conference in London. They called to me, and I swear I went over to them to berate them for their clothes, and their placards, and their screams. But when she reached out and touched me, I. . . ’ The

nobleman shook his head. ‘I saw the light. That’s the only way I can describe it. I went with them, and talked with them. Later that day, I returned to the conference, and made the speech that some say began the Reconstruction.’

‘All this is known,’ Holmes said. ‘It was a simple matter to post questions concerning Bloom on the relevant pages of Mr Hutchings’s computer service.

Justine was one of the first people to contact me. I gave her the names of 165

all the nearby farms, and this evening she told me she knew you, and that you were the most ethical farmer she knew.’ Holmes formed his fingers into a spire, and I swear that he allowed himself a moment’s satisfaction. ‘For we were, after all, searching for someone who would gather over thirty barrels of Bloom – that is the total amount missing from storage – and then not use it. I gather you are hoarding it to keep it out of the hands of others.’

Tasham sighed, and all the weight fell from his shoulders. ‘God bless you, Mr Holmes. That is exactly the situation. The government sources for this chemical. . . we have reason to believe that they cannot be trusted. I spent the last five years using my wealth to accumulate illicitly every stock, and now I merely await a process to dispose of the filth.’

Officer Forrester sat back in her chair. ‘And I had cause to expect a villain.’

A certain suspicion was forming in the back of my mind. I interceded. ‘But Holmes, what of the limbs we found in the deserted barn?’

‘I was just getting to that, Watson.’ The Great Detective, oblivious of the puzzled look on Tasham’s face, waved a hand nonchalantly. ‘There was obviously an accident involving an escape of Bloom. The chemical has the unusual, not to say miraculous, property of building flesh around the. . . *seed* of flesh. I believe that it is known as DNA. Instant homunculi are produced of whatever life is in the surroundings. The perfection of this rough process, as one Professor Kilbracken recently demonstrated, is in controlling it to grow one’s own musculature, or one’s crops, or, should one wish, to make rough, short-lived copies of oneself. Some poor menial, perhaps even his Lordship, was scratched, and his DNA interacted with the Bloom, causing the sudden spontaneous growth of numerous seemingly human body parts. Am I

right?'

Tasham stared at him. 'What limbs? What barn?'

Holmes stared back, utterly dumbfounded. It was one of the few occasions upon which I have seen him in this state.

The Brigadier got slowly to his feet. 'Just a thought,' he muttered. 'But could we see your stocks of this chemical?'

We swiftly descended the stairs of the mansion, to a heavily locked security door, for which Tasham produced a bunch of cards which I took to be this age's version of keys. The man was clearly puzzled, and I, for one, took his heartfelt story at face value. The thirty crimes that Holmes had mentioned, presumably one for every barrel, were surely the actions of a just man, in what had been, until recently, an unjust world.

The door swung open, and we stepped into the darkness. Tasham ignited the electric lamp on the ceiling.

There was nothing in the bare cellar, merely a slabbed stone floor that bore the marks of where many heavy and dirty articles had been.

166

Tasham stepped into the centre of the room, utterly appalled. 'The Bloom!'

he cried. 'My foul treasure that I would keep from others' grasp! It is gone!'

The Brigadier sighed. 'I do believe somebody once told me something pro-found concerning eggs and baskets. . . '

167

Blake's Heaven

'Giant insects?!' Mike Yates stared at the Doctor. They were both standing at the bar of the Time In A Bottle, with John Benton beside them. The Doctor had got back from seeing Muldwych to his lodgings just in time for last orders, his clothes looking none the worse for the ritual. He'd popped back to the TARDIS

to store the rings, and had been surprised to discover that there were now two time capsules on the green.

‘Shh!’ The Doctor looked around theatrically. ‘Very intelligent giant insects, living in my old TARDIS. The old thing got trapped in a tar-pit in an alternate universe, with them inside. They’re called the Charrl. They were residing in an extra-dimensional version of their homeworld, the true nature of which you don’t want to know. After a few generations, they’d come to regard me as a sort of deity. Civilizations do, if I’m not very careful. Amongst much religious warfare, a faction of very pro-science, rational Charrl sent an expedition to the console room. Great blasphemy. Finding me absent, they started to decipher the workings of the machine. Thirty generations later, they managed to pilot her out of the tar-pit, just as I time-rammed their TARDIS, resulting in the collapse of the alternate universe. Normally, their TARDIS would have been destroyed too, but the Fortean Flicker seems to have given them a very special grace. They came here through sheer coincidence, upon the back of the Flicker, although they prefer to see it as an example of my all-powerful will. It’s good to have the old TARDIS back, but every time I stick my head round the door they intend to throw flowers at me and ask me to lead them.’

He drained his small measure of brandy. ‘I’m not entirely sure what to do about them.’

Benton slapped the Time Lord on the back. ‘Invite them to the wedding, Doc.’

‘Oh,’ the Doctor muttered. ‘I’ve already done that.’

Yates and Benton looked at each other in horror.

‘And so I decided to write something serious, before it was too late,’ Emily told Chris, tapping the screen of her word-processor.

Chris leant closer to the machine, and smiled, recognizing one of the phrases on the screen. ‘Hey, that’s –’

‘Don’t tell them. There’s a little notice in the front of the book that says “no similarity to people living or dead”, but I break that rule all the time.’



‘Can I be in one? I’ve never been in a book.’

‘Well, I’ll try and think of something. You’re a bit sci-fi, really.’

‘Isn’t he a bit romantic too?’ Ishtar entered, carrying a tray with cups of cocoa on it. Peter had already gone to bed, after telling Emily that he didn’t know what to make of the new gleam in her eye, or the dirt in her hair. Doris had headed back to the guest-house, to wait for the Brigadier, and O’Kelly Isley, still whistling his tune, had departed with her.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Emily murmured, taking a cup. ‘I’ll leave that for you to judge.’ Chris and Ishtar exchanged hopeful glances.

‘OK, so why the change of heart?’ Ishtar asked her foster mother, wrapping her arms around her.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Why did you walk in the door and immediately ask Chris to come and see your work, since you hate him?’

Emily made a tiny adjustment to some of the punctuation on the screen.

‘Oh, I don’t hate him, I hated you going out with him. And I still feel a sort of gut hatred when you start cuddling and things. But that’s absolutely wrong of me, as I realized tonight when the Doctor and I were naked in a field.’

‘Should I tell Peter?’ Ish asked.

‘I intend to tell him myself, at some length.’ Emily tapped a final key and shut down the computer. ‘Now, it’s getting late. I’m going to bed. You two can’

– she pinched the top of her nose and made the sort of frown people make when they’re trying desperately not to think about something – ‘make your own arrangements. Goodnight.’

She left rather quickly. Ish pressed Chris’s nose. ‘One-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. . . ’ she said happily.

‘Yeah.’ Chris lifted her into his arms. ‘Whatever the Doctor did, he’s really good at it.’

Kadiatu, having returned to the pub from a brief reconnaissance of the churchyard, had cornered the Doctor, and was urgently explaining to him what had happened. ‘Doctor, everybody here was turned into a zombie!’

Braxiatel was wafting by with a glass of wine. ‘The effect persists with the bar staff,’ he murmured.

The Doctor was about to answer when Keri ran in, and grabbed at his sleeve, indicating the door. Her fur was wet from running. ‘Doctor!’ she panted.

‘James has been murdered!’

The Doctor was about to answer when the Brigadier, followed by Holmes, Watson, Roz and Tasham, burst into the pub. ‘Ah, there you are, Doctor,’ the Brigadier began. ‘Had a spot of bother up at Steel Farm.’

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‘Wait, wait. . . ’ The Doctor waggled his hands at the wrists, his fingers jumbling as he tried to sort out all the information. ‘Kadiatu, Keri, tell me slowly, what did you see?’

Bernice looked down at Jason. ‘So you’re definitely not having it off with anybody else: man, woman or alien of indeterminate gender? Or Keri?’

‘Absolutely not. I am not, as you put it, having it off with anybody.’

‘Well, what do you call this then?’ Bernice shifted slightly and bounced a bit.‘Apart from you.’ Jason gasped. ‘Definitely apart from you. God, you’re beautiful up there.’

‘I’m not sure I like the way you put that, either. But I’ll take it as a compliment.’

The curtains billowed to the same cool breeze that shifted across their skin.

They’d been talking over what they’d discovered and felt in Puterspace. And Bernice had slowly grown to believe that Jason was telling the truth. Especially when he told her about kissing Dorothée. That was such a small crime, considering he’d declined anything further and left, that she was charmed by his former reluctance to talk about it.

She was not, however, charmed by Dorothée’s approach to marriage coun-selling, and vowed to have some serious words with her about it.

When she and Jason had returned to their room, Benny had locked the door and pushed him back on to the bed. She'd used his socks to tie him to the bedposts.

'What, are you going to leave me here?' he asked, laughing.

Bernice considered for a moment. 'No.'

That had been three hours ago. And in that time she'd made sure his body was hers, and, if one was being analytical about it, proved scientifically that, unless he was a man of far greater powers than she'd previously supposed, Jason hadn't been bonking anybody else today. Probably.

'I'm getting hungry,' he mock-moaned now.

'Don't tempt me.'

He laughed again, and then grew quietly serious as she started to move, closed her eyes, letting go all pretence, rocking back and forth on him.

'I do love you,' he said. 'These are the best times, when it's just us. I might look at other –'

'Hush.'

'No, what I mean to say –'

'Just shut up. I want to finish this whole process off, and you're talking all the time.'

'I want to be your husband,' he whispered.



'You are. I love you. You are.'

After a little while, she lay in his arms, both of them soft and spent, the sheets, splattered and wet with sweat, thrown off them. She was crying, as he realized when he moved his arm to encircle the fond softness of her waist.

'You're crying. I'm sorry, I –'

'Shut up again.'

‘But you’re crying.’

‘You fool.’ She laughed and cried, biting his shoulder. ‘There’s *good* crying, you know.’

‘Oh. Is there?’

Then there was a long silence, as if Bernice was trying to form a solid sentence that wouldn’t collapse into tears, and she finally said: ‘I love you so much.’

In the early hours of the morning, the Doctor led a scouting party to the barn where Holmes had found the limbs. Roz insisted that she’d read the maps correctly, but they couldn’t even locate the barn itself, never mind the offending feet. Looking back on the experience, Roz started to think of it as dreamlike, something out of a nightmare. Only Watson’s stolid insistence on the absolute reality of what they’d seen convinced her that it had been real.

Holmes looked very upset indeed, pacing with his hands in his pockets. He swung and scowled at the Doctor. ‘I have failed. Despite all my researches.

I made’ – he spat the word between his teeth – ‘assumptions, regarding the effects of Bloom. I neglected other possible explanations, because I was not aware of those possibilities.’

The Doctor played delicately with the ends of his scarf, his eyes narrow-ing. ‘I have a feeling. . . that what happened to you here went beyond the knowledge of the year twenty ten.’

‘Yeah, you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of,’ Roz agreed.

Keri had been looking distracted during the trip to the fields. Now she looked up at the Doctor urgently. ‘All this is really weird, yeah? But what about James? Has this got anything to do with him being attacked?’

‘If he *was* attacked.’ Watson put a gentle hand on Keri’s shoulder. ‘Your perceptions, my dear, are not the most reliable.’

‘I don’t know. . . ’ the Doctor mused. ‘I’ve called Annie and the police, but no news of him yet. . . ’ He stopped for a moment, deep in thought, staring at his spats. Then he grinned, and yawned extravagantly, spreading his arms wide under the moon. ‘It’s getting late. Let’s sleep on it.’

In the night, birds clattered through the trees of the forest, the moon slowly swung past the horizon, and the fires of the Travellers in the upper meadow 172

burnt down to ash. Ishtar slept in Chris's arms in her own bed, happy to be at home.

Bernice and Jason held on to each other all night.

Keri woke suddenly several times, certain she was going to sneeze, full of nightmares about Tzun and figures moving through the streets.

Saul's bells rang to and fro as he dreamt. His dreams weren't like those of human beings: none of the weight of limbs, and no fantasies of flight. This night he felt something stirring near to him, an irritating and mysterious something, just out of the corner of his psychic eye.

The Doctor stood by his current TARDIS, listening irritatedly to the noises of what sounded like a party coming from his former one. Slowly, he turned, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness. There was nothing. Or there was something, and it was all around. He couldn't tell one from the other. He still felt, in his hearts of hearts, that Cheldon Bonniface was a safe place. He still wanted to leave his companions here. At the first hint of a holiday, they had, after all, put down the first small roots and started lives. Even Roz, in a way.

He shook his head and got into his new TARDIS, hoping that the Charrl were going to tidy up the console room of the old one in the morning. More guests needed to be picked up. And he was going to do that.

Whatever was gathering in the shadows, this celebration was going to happen.

Dorothée and Danny watched the sun come up, wrapped in a duvet and leaning against the windowsill of Dorothée's room. They'd put down most of a bottle of brandy that Dorothée had brought through time, which was now sitting in the corner of the window, propping up Dorothée's copy of *Madame Bovary*.

'You should have invited me to the sesh,' Danny told her. 'I'd have liked to have met Sweet Hooligan.'

'I'm just glad that I saw him as Damon – shows I'm not getting completely French.'

‘Well, like, you got completely sidetracked and let the guy you were with spiral off into the collective unconscious. . . ’

‘He wasn’t into what I was offering, unlike on every previous occasion, the bastard. Didn’t want to do his stuff in front of the Goddess.’

Danny took a swig. ‘From what you’ve told me, Ace, he had to be honest.

He blew you out ’cos he was really not interested. Bit like me, a long time ago 173

when I was mad.’ He put a challenging little sting on the last word, his eyes flashing as if it was 1976 all over again. ‘Here, you know what I want to do?’

‘Don’t you start.’

‘I want to pop across to wherever I’m living in twenty ten and see what I’ve ended up like. See if I’m still doing music and stuff.’

Dorothée tried not to look shocked amidst her slack-jawed whiskyness.

‘Erm –’

Danny held up a hand. ‘Yeah, I know, there are laws. The older me could tell me bad stuff, I know.’

‘Yeah.’ Dorothée let out a long breath. ‘Right.’

When Chris woke up, there was something odd sitting on the pillow between him and Ishtar. Rubbing his nose, he reached out a hand and grabbed it. It was a watch, with various complex dials and advanced measuring devices on its face. Chris scrunched up his eyes and looked at it. ‘Neat.’

‘Neat? Nobody says “neat”.’ Ishtar had woken.

‘What’s this?’ Chris dangled the watch in front of her perfect eyes.

‘Present.’

‘Oh.’ Chris looked puzzled for a moment, but then clicked the watchband around his wrist and grinned. ‘OK.’

William Blake strode out of the TARDIS, and stood on the village

green, inhaling great gulps of air. After a moment's contemplation, he fell to his knees, his palms raised to the sky, and began to pray. 'Oh, my good Lord, my head is giddy with the very green of it. Centuries hence, and all is well. This is Heaven, then. Jerusalem.'

'No,' muttered the Doctor obliquely, ushering his other guests out of the TARDIS behind him. 'Luton Airport.' Blake had spent most of the journey explaining to the Doctor that, when last they met, he had been affecting ag-nosticism as a sort of dare for God to punish him. He hadn't, but Blake had punished himself instead, and was now feeling basically all right. The Doctor had lost track about halfway.

The latest batch of guests included an upright four-armed blue elephant, who was looking around nervously. 'Anybody else I know, coming to this wedding?' he asked.

'I'm sure,' the Doctor assured him. 'Besides, Provost – Major Beltempest, in that body, you'll have no trouble breaking the ice.'

'Yes. Right.' The blue elephant nodded. 'Fine.'

'Monsieur Beltempest, please stand aside, I have urgent business here.' A distinguished, grey-haired man pushed his way past the others. 'Doctor, where is the divine Bernice?'

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The Doctor pointed in the direction of the Hutchingses' house. 'But it's a bit early, Baron Denon.'

'Early? *Non*. It is nearly too late. I must talk to Mademoiselle Summerfield, before she becomes a Madame. I must persuade her out of this ridiculous match to this disgusting-sounding ros'beef English street urchin person! I shall not return until she has seen the light!' Pointing a finger skywards, he set off.

A handsome, pencil-thin young man in an expensive jacket leant on the corner of the TARDIS and looked round the village approvingly. 'I like it, Doctor. Charming. Very Earth.'

A bearded face appeared over his shoulder. 'Couldn't agree more, Forgwyn.

I may call you Forgwyn?'

'No. . . ' The younger man sighed, brushing the man's hand off his

shoulder like a speck of dust.

‘There are rooms for all of you in the guest-house, Alexander,’ the Doctor murmured, glancing worriedly after Denon.

‘Guest-house?’ Blake cried. ‘Ah, lead me to it, the very guest-house of heaven!’

‘Wait until you’ve seen the plumbing,’ the Doctor told him. He glanced at the second police box, from which was emanating the sound of heavy insect snoring. ‘Come on.’

He led the new guests across the green, but, as he did so, he looked around, frustrated and on edge.

If there was a menace in this ordinary village on a Monday morning, he couldn’t see a trace of it.

‘I am Denon,’ the curator and artist announced to Emily, who stood on the doorstep in her bathrobe, glowering. ‘And I am here to take the lady of the house away.’

Emily cast her eyes skyward. ‘You’re far too late.’

‘ *Pardon?* ’

‘Many times in the past few decades, I have prayed to the tiny and frustrated god of writers for a finely chiselled Frenchman with salt and pepper hair to arrive at my door and say that very thing. It’s too late now, sir, coming here and saying that. I’m married.’

A rueful smile creased Denon’s face. ‘A tragedy. But, as a fellow sufferer, you see that we can prevent this terrible thing from happening again. I am here to rescue Bernice.’

Emily laughed and opened the door. ‘Come on in. I’m not opposed to you having a go.’

* * *

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Chris was showing his watch off to Bernice and Jason, who were still in bed.

‘Isn’t it great?’ he said, looking somewhat ungainly in one of Ishtar’s spare bathrobes.

‘Well, yes. . . ’ Bernice, one hand keeping the sheet firmly in place, examined the watch. ‘But, Chris, this is way beyond current technology. Where did –?’

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’m sure the Doctor gave it to her.’

‘You didn’t ask?’

‘No.’

Bernice glanced at Jason. ‘And they wonder why he never made it as a detective.’

At that moment, Denon burst in through the door. He took in the scene with one glance, and looked between Jason and Chris. ‘Which of you is this supposed would-be husband?’ he demanded.

The two men pointed to each other. ‘He is.’

Bernice was about to leap up, but then realized how this would leave both her and Jason. ‘ *Mon cher*,’ she called. ‘Give me a moment to dress and then I’ll give you a big hug.’

The Doctor stood next to the eagle lectern, glowering. ‘No sign of him at all?’

Annie sat on the first pew, her head in her hands. ‘No. He wasn’t in this morning. I called his house, and his housemate said that he didn’t come home last night. Keri’s right, isn’t she? Something awful’s happened to him.’

‘Not necessarily. There isn’t a body. This sleepwalking business. . . did you or Saul notice anything?’

‘I just saw them through the window,’ Annie sighed.

‘And I felt them approach,’ Saul added. ‘But nothing more. I sensed no undue influence on them.’

‘Add to that the missing barn,’ the Doctor murmured, ‘and we have. . . What do we have? A missing man and two surreal mysteries. Not particularly threatening, and yet. . . and yet. . . ’

The Bishop came in from the vestry, his face still showing traces of the permanently surprised expression he’d been wearing ever since he arrived in the village. But now it was moderated by concern. ‘Did you search the woods, Doctor?’

‘Yes. No sign of a struggle. Nothing. That’s what bothers me. All my devices

– the TARDIS sensors, my own instincts – tell me there’s nothing wrong.’ The Doctor glanced up at the rafters. ‘Saul, can you search for James?’

‘I am sorry, Doctor,’ chorused the church. ‘But, as I told you, James is one of those people I do not register mentally. I have no idea where he is.’

‘Have you noticed anything. . . strange?’

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‘Only in my nightmares. I am disturbed by my fears nearly every night. It is as if there were some dark force right on my – pardon me – right on my doorstep. Almost too close for me to sense it.’

The Bishop slowly shook his head. ‘Every time I hear you speak, Saul, I jump. Your very existence seems to speak directly of divine providence. All these aliens and wonders – my dreams are filled with them.’

‘I’m not getting much sleep either, Bish,’ Annie sighed, running her hands through her hair. ‘At first I thought it was just that bloody couple, but – oh, excuse me.’

William Blake had appeared at the door of the church. He was gazing inside in raptures. Beside him stood Máire, a vast pile of wild flowers in her hands.

She was looking slightly disquieted by Blake.

‘An angel,’ Blake said, pointing at the ceiling. ‘Do you not see him?’

‘An Earth Spirit, actually,’ said Wire nodding rather curtly to Annie. ‘These are for him, if you’ll allow it.’

Annie slapped the pew in distraction, and forced a grin. ‘Theology, eh? You wait all this time, and three come along at once.’

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Hens And Stags

The week passed uneventfully, with the county police conducting a

thorough search of the woods, and James being officially declared a missing person. The Doctor and Watson carried out medical examinations on the sleepwalkers, but found nothing, and the hut, with its grisly cargo, remained unseen.

On Friday morning, Vivant Denon went walking, arm in arm with Bernice, across the green. They passed Hamlet Macbeth, who was offering the unicorn that was grazing outside Mrs Higgins's a lump of sugar. 'There you are, my beauty,' he cooed.

'So tomorrow is the wedding,' Denon sighed. 'Are you certain that you still wish to go through with this madness?'

'Yes,' said Bernice, certain. 'All doubt has been banished from my mind. I just wish we didn't have this whole awful business of James and the vanishing barn hanging over the whole thing.'

Denon wouldn't be deflected. 'You know I still feel for you, that my heart is still full of *l'amour* for you. I beg you to reconsider.'

Benny squeezed his arm. 'Vivant, you were very kind to a shipwrecked traveller, and I loved our time together. You. . . well, let's just say you taught me a lot. But I'm convinced about this now. I'm going to marry Jason.'

Dorothée crossed paths with them, deep in thought. At the sight of Bernice, she waved absently and then quickly walked on.

Miss Gjovaag and Miss Kusinitz clapped their hands together and sighed proudly at the sight of Chris and Roz, both done up in elegant morning suits.

'Great.' Chris grinned. 'I've never been a best man before.'

Roz was looking worried. She'd walked through the measuring process distantly. 'I can believe that.'

'Are you still worried about James? He'll pop up.'

Roz narrowed her eyes at him. 'There's optimism and then there's absolute raving stupidity, and I think you've crossed the line, boy.'

Chris shrugged. 'You just need to have a little faith sometimes.'

Jason emerged from the fitting room, looking particularly smart, a silver waistcoat setting off the tight lines of his suit. He thumped his

top hat into shape and propped it on his head at a jaunty angle. ‘What do you think?’



‘Superb, sir,’ Miss Gjovaag cried. ‘Now, you must all hurry on your way.

Our. . . ’ She glanced at Roz. ‘Our other ladies are coming in soon, and they mustn’t see you, Mr Kane.’

‘That’s a pity. I’d really like to see her today.’ Jason took the hat off again.

‘Chris, have you lot got anything organized for tonight?’

Chris pursed his lips. ‘I think, for operational reasons, that I’d better not reveal that information at this moment in time.’

Deep in the newly created rehearsal rooms of the TARDIS, the Isley Brothers clapped their hands together and let out a long breath. They now had a perfect routine for the gig of their career. O’Kelly only hoped that the surprise he had in store for the Doctor wouldn’t bring about the end of the universe or anything.

Nearby, Jacquilian and Sanki nodded crisply, their own number composed and rehearsed, note perfect.

And at the end of the corridor, Plasticine hit the ground, having jumped into the air at the end of their number. Danny and Cob grinned at Kit. He looked worried, as if a sudden thought had occurred to him.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Has anybody talked to Benny about billing?’

Bernice looked happily at Keri and Dorothée in their bridesmaids’ dresses, clutching her own bouquet to her chest. ‘Goodness, you look wonderful.’

Neither of the bridesmaids was looking exactly delighted. In fact, they both looked positively worried. Bernice knew that had nothing to do with the dresses, but she didn’t want the two dressmakers to take offence, so she’d spent the last ten minutes or so trying to jolly her friends up. ‘What do you think of the footwear?’

Dorothée glanced down at the Doc Marten boots that Benny was

wearing.

‘They’re you, but why?’

‘Just something to show the world that I’m still me under all this lace. And I wasn’t keen on heels with this train. I don’t want to fall over on the way to the altar. People may get the wrong idea. Talking of which, I don’t suppose you two have arranged anything for tonight, have you?’

Dorothée put her hands behind her back. ‘Nothing at all.’

So it was that Jason found himself sitting in the, by now, reconstructed bar of the Black Swan, at seven o’clock that evening, staring at six pints of ale on the table in front of him. The male wedding guests, and the large number of locals who were watching from the shiny new booths as though this was a spectator sport, sat around, looking at him expectantly.



‘Lads, lads. . . ’ Jason sighed. ‘I am not going to get out of my brain and do a series of things I’ll regret. Not on the night before my wedding.’

‘Of course not.’ Chris slapped him on the back. ‘We’re just going to have a quiet drink, and get you back to the spare bed in my room in plenty of time for you to get a good night’s sleep.’

Jason looked around the circle of expectant faces. ‘Really?’

They all nodded.

Jason gingerly picked up the first pint. ‘A quiet drink then,’ he murmured.

‘Why not?’

Bernice stared at the six pints sitting on the table in front of her in the Time In A Bottle. ‘Is that all you could afford?’ she asked.

The ladies sitting around her laughed. ‘Won’t that do for a start?’ asked Dorothée.

‘As a sort of aperitif. . . ’ Benny murmured. She lifted the first pint and downed it in one. She wiped the froth from her mouth and hiccuped daintily.

‘I’m glad I used that word now, because I’m sure that in a few minutes I won’t be able to get my tongue around it.’

‘Tell me now,’ the Doctor whispered in Jason’s ear, sometime after the prospective groom had downed his third pint, ‘have you ever been near Tasham, or done more with Carrie O’Grady than mess up your collar? Tell me the truth.’

‘No.’ Jason sighed. ‘Don’t *you* trust me now?’

‘Yes, I do.’ The Doctor straightened up, satisfied. ‘But I wish I knew the future. I wish there was some way of knowing that you’ll be happy together.’

He sighed. ‘Time will tell, I suppose.’

‘So,’ Dorothée whispered in Benny’s ear, ‘you’re certain about all this, are you?’

‘Yes,’ Bernice assured her. ‘I’m absolutely. . . absol. . . I’m convinced.’

‘Because. . . I have to tell you, about something that me and Jason did. . . ’

Dorothée was looking charmingly serious, Benny thought. All this fuss about a snog.

‘Don’t worry.’ She patted her arm. ‘I know all about that, and it’s fine by me. Do it any time; it’ll keep him in practice.’

Dorothée stared at her.

‘So, the omi ajax. . . ’ Alexander nodded towards Benton. ‘TBH?’

‘Nada,’ Mike Yates shook his head.

‘You could have fooled me,’ Sanki muttered. ‘Nada the lallies.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Forgwyn sighed. ‘It’s not at all clever, you know. We all know what you’re talking about.’



Alexander put a hand heavily on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Count yourself fortunate,’ he said, ‘that you have never needed a secret language.’

Blake and Muldwych were deep in conversation with Hamlet Macbeth

concerning the origin of Excalibur. At one point, Muldwych looked up and caught the Doctor's eye. He turned back to the group and cleared his throat. 'Ah, perhaps we could talk about something else. . . '

Savaar, the armour and great claw stripped from his arm, was arm-wrestling Captain Traylen. The battle had been going on for five minutes now. The Brigadier looked on approvingly. Savaar addressed him, never taking his eyes from those of his opponent. 'Your name,' he hissed, 'is known to us. It must be a descendant of yours, a Lethbridge-Stewart. He caused our people much distress.'

'Really? I'm terribly sorry. Distress in what way?'

The Doctor was at Savaar's shoulder in an instant. 'Savaar,' was all he said, warningly.

The Ice Lord sucked in a deep breath, and, with a sudden effort, thumped the UNIT man's hand on to the table. He looked up at the Brigadier. 'In a military way.'

The Brigadier saw the look on the Doctor's face and decided not to press the point. But he allowed himself a smile. 'Oh. Well then, jolly good.' He had had only a small glass of wine, and was looking very pale. All that wandering about in cold fields hadn't done him any good.

He put his glass to his lips for a moment, and thought about not existing.

Jason finished his sixth pint with a flourish, and slammed the glass down on the table. 'Okay, then. . . ' he slurred. 'What's next?'

'Next,' said Chris, standing up, 'we're going to celebrate a very old custom.

We're going to walk the bounds of the village. Come on!'

To the cheers of the locals, the party of males, human, alien, and out of time, stumbled towards the door.

'So. . . ' Benny threw back her last glass and rested her head on her hands.

'What happens now?'

'We have several possible options.' Ishtar produced a list. 'Trip using

Dorothée and Kadiatu's travel machines to some particularly decadent and hedonistic era of Earth history. Nothing archaeological.'

Benny shook her head. 'Not on the night before. I might change my mind and end up with Alexander the Great or something.'

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'Alternatively,' Kadiatu said, patting her owl on the head, 'we could all get body bepples. . . aM!xitsa here has all the information required to do it.'

'Now that. . . ' Bernice tickled the owl under the chin – 'has possibilities.'

'Show us the way to go home. . . ' the mass of trudging males sang, as they returned from where they'd left Jason. They slowed as they approached the churchyard, and started to shush each other theatrically and tiptoe.

Until, from the graveyard, there came a noise. A sort of rumble.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. He glanced around the men, wondering if they were about to become slow and glassy-eyed, but all he saw were the usual variety of alcohol-dulled expressions.

The men stopped, and wandered over to the wall of the churchyard, brave and curious as only the really drunken are.

The Doctor put up his hand. 'Careful.' But they'd reached the wall by now, and were looking over. Danny put his boot on the edge, and, helped by Cob and Cook William, climbed over.

Watson looked aghast at Danny. 'Tread carefully. The dead slumber beneath your feet.'

'Don't worry,' whispered Danny. 'I don't want to wake any of them up, do I?'ChristuggedontheDoctor'ssleeve. 'Hey,thisisn'tfun. Let'skeepongoing.'

The Doctor waved him aside, concentrating frantically. 'No, wait, I wonder. . . '

Cook William put a hand on Alec Without Gloves's shoulder. 'Alec, something about that sound. . . I think I've heard it before. I think we both have. . . '

The Doctor was about to call back when, from the other side of the churchyard, there came a complex electronic whistle. It was answered, a moment later, by another one. Lights danced in the bushes by the far wall.

Before the Doctor could do anything, Jason's stag party was leaping over the wall, heading across the churchyard like a cavalry charge. He looked frustratedly around himself, then, realizing that his calls and protestations were falling on stony ground, allowed Savaar to help him over the wall.

'What are they doing, Doctor?' he asked.

'They don't know and neither do I!' snapped the Time Lord. 'Oh, slow them down at least!'

The fittest of the men, amongst them Braxiatel and Cob, had already reached the shrubs. They stopped as something large lumbered out of them.

Several large things. A small army of large things in fact.

The Ice Warriors and UNIT men immediately threw themselves to the ground, calling to the others to do the same. The Brigadier reached for his mobile phone.

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Floating out of cover came a group of hovering metal spheres, gunlike protrusions jutting from their casings. 'We are the Phractons!' their leader declared. 'And we are here to take over this puny world of yours!'

The Doctor stepped forward, holding his lapels, braving the aim of the invaders' guns. He looked to have suddenly acquired a strange confidence, all doubt dropping from him. Behind him, he could hear the sound of guards clicking off sonic cannons and service revolvers. 'The Phractons. Yes. I was expecting you. Waiting for you to show your hand. But there's something you should know: I've already been to your spacecraft, disabled your weapons, persuaded your support units to become pacifists, and –' his gaze became dark and stormy – 'destroyed your home planet. So go. Now. Before I really lose my temper.'

The Phractons turned to each other, turned back, and then broke into a spontaneous round of applause.

The Doctor looked down at his shoes. ‘Oh, thank you, thank you, I do love the appreciation of invading monsters. . . ’

An owl that had been sitting in the branches of a tree cried out, and shone a beam from its eyes on to the spheres. They faded back into the women of the wedding party, who pointed at the men and aliens lying behind gravestones and propped against trees, and laughed their heads off.

‘Doris!’ the Brigadier cried, genuinely appalled. ‘You. . . I. . . I could have shot you!’

‘Well, that’s why we chose this lot,’ Bernice explained. ‘We thought that you’d ask questions first. My future husband about?’

‘No, actually,’ said Peter, glaring at Emily and Ishtar. ‘We left him. . . in a very special place.’

Bernice was about to ask what he meant when the bells of St Christopher’s started to ring, alarmingly, suddenly, randomly, as if Saul was having a real nightmare.

Everybody in the graveyard fell, the ground shifting as if in an earthquake.

‘Oh no!’ the Doctor cried. ‘It’s –’

And then something strange happened.

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Meanwhile, Inside the Charrl’s Other-

Dimensional Homeworld Contained

Within the Doctor’s Original TARDIS

Standing on the Village Green

Jason woke up to what sounded like an alarm clock. His brain clicked into action, booting up his consciousness stage by stage.

One: he was awake, and everything was basically OK, apart from a few odd sensations, because. . .

Two: he’d been drinking last night, but didn’t feel too bad at all, even though. . .

Three: actually, he felt awful, terrible, as if all the water had been sucked out of his head and fallen into his stomach, or rather risen, because. . .

Four: he was upside down.

He was upside down.

He opened his eyes.

Dressed only in his underwear, he was hanging by his ankles, which were bound by some sticky substance to. . . a tree branch overhead. The trunk was a few feet from him, his head was just off of the humus floor of the rain forest, and on the branches all around him sat giant insects.

Giant insects. Right.

Jason opened his mouth and screamed. ‘You bastards!’

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The Wedding

Bernice awoke, curled around a pillow. She went through her own brain-booting-up process, except in this case booting-up was a very evocative description. It felt as though she was being continually kicked in the temples.

Oh. That was an alarm clock. Right. She waved a hand in its general direction, and sent it, clattering and still ringing, across the floor of the Hutchingses’ back bedroom.

Bernice swore into the pillow, and, stretching to the very edge of the bed, tried to reach the alarm clock with her fingers.

She fell out of bed, slowly, like a landmass shifting, and ended up in a pile of Bernice, quilt and pillow, her fingers still a few inches from the clock.

In this state, now woken, she started to realize who she was, where she was, and what day it was. It occurred to her that Jason should be sleeping next to her, but wasn’t, which was because. . .

She blinked, and looked at the time on the clock. ‘Cruk!’

‘Cruk!’ Bernice pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt, and glanced at

her watch. ‘Cruk!’ She ran out of the room.

It occurred to her as she ran down the street towards Kusinitz and Gjovaag’s that the village seemed quiet. Nobody in the streets. No shops open for business. And, above her, the sky was still quite dark. There was only a suggestion of dawn in the east. She stopped, suddenly feeling very foolish.

‘Crukkity cruk!’ she shouted, glancing again at her watch. ‘You bitches!’

The newsagent was putting out his advertising boards and sending boys and girls on bikes off in all directions, so Bernice wandered over to his shop and got a paper and some chocolate milk. ‘I’m getting married today!’ she told the paper delivery children. They made faces and disgusted noises.

Bernice sat on the steps of Kusinitz and Gjovaag’s and read the paper and drank her milk, feeling nervous and excited and, to her horror, already a bit teary. It was as if this was some sort of private ritual on the edge of a big life change. She certainly wanted to be married to Jason; there was no doubt about that in her mind now. And today was going to be a great party, but it was such a huge thing to go through. . .

She glanced up at the sky and raised the chocolate milk to somewhere distant in the last, fading stars. ‘I wish you were here to see it, Dad. You’ll like 187

him when you meet him.’

Looking up, her eye caught on something strange. A magpie fluttering to its nest in the top of an old elm tree, carrying in its beak. . . well, it looked like a tiny person.

Bernice shook her head and blinked. The thing vanished into the nest. She must have been mistaken, or it could have been a doll or something. ‘Oh dear, more mystical imagery,’ she complained. ‘I hope that’s a symbol of luck.’

She returned to her paper, and her thoughts turned to last night. Those bitches, setting her watch and alarm clock to the wrong time. They’d all put down a lot last night – her hangover was testament to that. In fact, she couldn’t remember anything much after the graveyard. Oh well, somebody would fill her in. If anybody was in a fit state to, that was.

Above her, a window opened, and Miss Gjovaag poked her head out. ‘My dear, you’re early!’

Bernice looked up. ‘I’m just tremendously eager to marry,’ she said. ‘Isn’t that foolish of me?’

Chris was laying Jason’s suit out on the bed of his room.

‘Thank you so much for getting me out of that predicament you left me in last night,’ the bridegroom was muttering, with ill grace.

‘The things you boys get up to,’ Roz sighed, struggling with her tie in the mirror. She’d insisted on the full morning suit bit as Jason’s usher, not wanting to disturb the pattern of three dresses, three suits. ‘Very homoerotic, if you ask me.’

‘So what did you lot do last night?’ Chris grinned at her. ‘Something sensible and sane? Apart from turning into a bunch of invading balls, that is?’

‘Well, after that, we. . . ’ Roz scrunched up her face, as if shuddering at an unpleasant memory. ‘I can’t remember,’ she concluded, shrugging at herself in the mirror. ‘That’s what you get for drinking so much.’

Benny’s bridesmaids arrived at the dress shop to find the condemned woman enjoying a hearty breakfast, which she’d also put together for the old Dutch ladies.

‘Blimey, that’s what I call energetic,’ muttered Dorothée, slumping into a chair.

‘Enthusiastic, yeah?’ added Keri.

Benny waved a piece of toast at them. ‘Can either of you remember much about last night?’

The bridesmaids shook their heads and made a variety of negative grunts.

‘No.’ Benny frowned. ‘I thought not.’

* * *

188

The Doctor threw himself flat in the churchyard, his ear pressed to the

ground.

After a second, he scrambled to his knees and started padding along like a bloodhound. . .

He found himself face to face with a gravestone. A tiny one. He read the inscription, and his face creased into a dark frown.

The Doctor sat in the topmost branches of a tree, poking through the contents of a magpie's nest with the aid of his umbrella. The bird watched from a nearby branch.

He waved a jumble of fingers at it. 'Thank you. That's what I thought too. . . '

The Doctor inspected his shoes in the mirror. He bent to polish the toe of the left one slightly with his handkerchief, and then clicked his heels together, satisfied.

The Doctor opened the door of his old TARDIS, and poked his head tenta-tively around the door. 'Hello?' he called. 'Up and about? Suits pressed?

Buttonholes prepared?'

A chittering and a shower of petals greeted him.

By eleven o'clock, the church hall was a hive of activity, with the Brigadier and Doris striding about, watching Traylen and his catering corps laying out tables for the buffet and checking guests off against a list. It was becoming clear that the Doctor was intending to bring many more people to the already dimensionally enlarged hall than had so far shown up.

'At least we don't have to prepare a seating plan,' the old soldier muttered.

'Don't know what we'd do about Mr Blake and those Traveller chaps. Religious differences and all that.'

'Oh, they'd get on.' Doris patted his arm. 'Don't you think that that's the reason for him holding the wedding here? To bring all sorts of people together and see if they get on? Heavens, you might even start being civil to Mr Macbeth.'

The Brigadier's moustache twitched and he frowned mockingly, a

twinkle in his eye. ‘I don’t know why he didn’t just go the whole hog and invite the Master. I –’

He stopped, and though he retained his smile, all the colour washed from his face. He stumbled towards Doris, and, grimly and carefully, she helped him to a chair.

‘Don’t fuss,’ he whispered. ‘Who’s next on the list?’

‘Shall I call a doctor?’

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The Brigadier paused for a moment, and then said, very carefully: ‘No.

When it happens, I don’t want some blasted intern sitting on my chest. Understood?’

‘Understood, Alastair. How long –?’

‘Oh, days, hours. Who knows? Get this job out of the way, anyway. See this girl of the Doctor’s married. Probably exerted myself too much last night.

I only had one glass, but. . . do you know, I still can’t quite remember much about it. . . ’

Doris was looking at him, every ounce of her control expended on keeping her face still, on not making a fuss. He glanced up at her, and managed a more genuine smile. He took her hand. ‘Love you, old girl. Might not get the chance to say it later.’

She buried her teeth in her bottom lip, and couldn’t say anything.

With a careful effort, the Brigadier stood up again. He cleared his throat and looked back to his clipboard. ‘Now then, what do we do about these insect fellows?’

In Mrs Higgins’s dimensionally transcendental guest-house, the corridors, rooms, and many extra bathrooms were alive with activity, as Sherlock Holmes, William Blake and some reptile people from the far future vied to shower and tidy themselves up, following what all agreed was an absolutely wrecking night on the tiles.

Hamlet Macbeth and Ruby Duvall leant on each other in a long queue for a bath, watching the chaos go by, wide-eyed. ‘My dear, if I had told you that this is how we’d be spending the weekend. . . ’

Ruby glanced at the two invitations that they'd found on their bedroom table that morning. 'I'd not only have said that you were insane – I'd have thrown away the key myself.' She nudged him in the ribs. 'Just as well we both brought some nice clothes.'

'Ah. . . ' Macbeth rumbled. 'There are no accidents.'

With the time coming up to noon, Alexander and Annie watched a trail of presents, vast and tiny, being carried into the church hall. Alexander had opted for a particularly bright and garish waistcoat and a vast green carnation for a button-hole. He'd told Annie that, with so many fabulous creatures at the wedding, he had to compete that much more to stand out. He had his arm wrapped around the Vicar's waist, and Annie was, somewhat more shyly, returning the favour.

'Not many people would just wander up and cuddle a vicar, Mr Shuttleworth,' she laughed.



'Oh, but nobody's going to wonder about you and me, are they?' Alexander boomed. 'We've both devoted our lives to agape, Reverend. Socialism in my case, Christianity in yours, and both of us utterly celibate.' He glanced at Forgwyn as the boy wandered by. 'At least, in the last twenty-four hours. . . '

'I hear that you all went on something of a pub crawl last night?'

'Yes. Unfortunately, I remember nothing. Or perhaps fortunately. Didn't you go?'

'Not really done, having the Vicar along. Besides, I had to entertain the Bish, and I was rather hoping that James would show up.'

'Still no word?'

'No, but. . . ' she shrugged. 'What else can be done?'

Benny took a deep breath and was pinned into her frock around one o'clock.

She sipped from a cup of tea as Miss Gjovaag arranged some of Wire's flowers in her hair.

Dorothée stepped back from lacing up Benny's Doc Marten's and looked at her. 'You look great. Really gorgeous.'

Keri nodded. ‘Yeah. You’re really going to impress your future husband.’

Benny spilt the tea. ‘No!’ she bellowed. ‘Absolutely not!’

The others stared at her.

Miss Gjovaag raised her eyes to the ceiling and continued with the flowers.

‘We do our best, madam. Do you know, that’s the second time you’ve said that to us.’

Benny frowned, and sucked tea from her saucer. ‘Yes,’ she murmured. ‘I wonder why?’

The sun was shining high above the dress shop as Benny and her bridesmaids emerged at twenty to two. ‘Something old’ – Benny pointed to her boots –

‘something new, the dress. Something borrowed, oh my goodness, something borrowed. . . ’

Dorothée took a pin from her heavily supported hair and slipped it mean-inglessly into Bernice’s. ‘There you are. What about something blue?’

‘Erm, I think that’s taken care of.’

‘Where’s the car?’ Keri glanced along the road. ‘They should be here by now, yeah?’

Around the corner came a large black limousine, its electric motor purring slowly through the village streets. At the wheel was John Benton, looking very smart in his dress uniform, medal ribbons on the breast pocket. He stopped the car before the shop, stepped out and stared at Bernice. ‘Benny, you make me wish I was thirty years younger.’



Bernice smiled, feeling herself actually blushing. Perhaps there was something about being in a wedding dress that did that to you. ‘Just as well you’re not, then,’ she told Benton, and pecked him on the cheek as he held the rear door of the car open for her. Dorothée and Keri carefully folded the long train into the car behind her, closed the

door, and stepped back to wait for the next car.In the back of the car sat the Doctor, looking giddily happy at the sight of Bernice in her dress. He was in a slightly-too-big morning suit, the cuffs getting in the way of his hands, and the tails a touch too long. The only remaining part of his usual attire with his paisley scarf, which utterly failed to go with anything else. A top hat sat in his lap. ‘Once around the village, John,’ he called. ‘Timing is everything.’

‘Come on, aM!xitsa.’ Kadiatu, heading for the door of her room, gestured to the owl that had been sitting motionless on her dressing table all morning.

She’d assumed that it had been conserving power, but now she became worried. She went over to the drone and waved a hand in front of its eyes. They were still.

‘AM!xitsa?’

A high-pitched signal chimed from somewhere within the drone. ‘This drone is currently retrieving all memory from emergency extradimensional dumps. This process will take approximately eight hours.’

‘Oh.’ Kadiatu straightened up, and shrugged. ‘All right then. But you’ll miss the wedding.’

As the car moved off, Bernice took the Doctor’s hand. ‘I don’t know why I’m so nervous,’ she said. ‘I mean, it’s not as if anything can go wrong. If I cartwheel down the middle of the church, I’m still going to end up married. It’s a bit of a *fait accompli*, really.’

‘Not at all.’ The Doctor was looking mysterious. ‘The nerves are because there’s a choice involved. A big choice. You’re on the edge of a building.

Looking down. Do you jump? And if you jump, will you fly?’

Benny patted his hand. ‘That’s so reassuring.’

‘Thank you,’ the Doctor didn’t seem to have noticed the irony.

The congregation had filed into St Christopher’s, and were milling about, taking their places in the pews. A lot of them were having to stand near the back, which caused Annie to whisper urgently to Saul about the fire regulations.

Saul promised that, if there was a fire, he'd put it out. The Bishop was sitting in the front row, which made Annie feel as if she was in the middle of some 192

sort of 'vicary' test, like a driving test. When the Bishop tapped on the pew, she'd have to perform an emergency sermon.

A large number of villagers had gathered outside the church, waiting for the happy couple to arrive, and calling to the alien guests as they entered as if they were movie stars attending a première. The Charrl especially had caused comment. They'd sent a party of three representatives in formal robes, who were sitting beside Muldwych now, chittering happily to him. Surprisingly, he was chittering back.

'What about the photographs?'

Annie murmured under her breath.

'Shouldn't we –?'

'Those that show aliens will all show a strange fog on being developed,'

Saul told her. 'Apart from the official wedding shots. Excuse me if I'm rather silent during the wedding. That will take quite some concentration.'

Outside the church waited Jason, nervously tugging at his cuffs, with Chris and Roz at his side. They'd been handing out a buttonhole to everyone who had somewhere to put one.

'She's late,' Jason muttered, glancing at his watch.

'No she's not,' Roz sighed. 'You've still got two minutes. And knowing her, she'll keep you waiting another fifteen.'

'How do you feel?' asked Chris.

'Fine.' Jason licked his lips. 'Absolutely fine.'

'Of course, I could have settled down with Vivant, or I might have ended up being Guy's wife.' Bernice was reminiscing. 'But Jason's got the edge on either of them, all round. When you consider all the factors. At the end of the day.'

She turned to the Doctor. 'Don't you think?'

‘I’m not marrying him.’ The Doctor indicated the church ahead with a little nod. ‘We’re nearly there.’

Benny cocked her head to one side, and considered for a second. Then she tapped on the window between her and the driver. ‘Um, John, could we go round again?’

Jason watched, astonished, as the car slid past the church gate, and carried on its way up the road. ‘Where the hell is she going?’ he cried.

Chris shrugged. ‘Maybe she forgot something?’

Far beneath the church there lay the cellar, a musty old place lined with stone slabs. Now, in that dark and silent place, there came a sound. A chinking and a sliding. Then a crash, and a soft thudding of soil.

But none of this could be heard upstairs.

* * *

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The second limousine, driven by Mike Yates, drew up, and Dorothée and Keri got out. They looked around in astonishment. ‘Has she done a runner?’

Dorothée asked.

‘No,’ Roz growled, glancing at Jason’s worried face. ‘We have no reason to believe that as yet.’

Dorothée hitched up her skirts and ran up to the church. She peered around the door, taking in the packed pews. ‘Anybody seen an old lady? Maybe looking a bit lost?’

‘No.’ Chris put a hand on her arm. ‘Not yet. I’m sure she’ll be here, though.’

‘Yeah.’ Dorothée slapped her bouquet against the wall lightly. ‘Right.’

Annie had been checking that the musicians and the choirboys were ready.

Now she wandered to the door, and looked at the bridesmaids and ushers hopefully. ‘Any sign? Or can we go straight to the buffet?’

‘I suppose I really should. . . ’ Bernice sat back in her seat and decided. ‘All right. Go on then, John, let’s get back there, as fast as we can.’

‘Fast as I can?’ Benton laughed. ‘OK. You asked for it.’

The limo accelerated into a tight turn around a village corner. Clinging on to the interior fittings, the Doctor looked at Benny, concerned. ‘Don’t rush into this.’

‘I’m not. I just thought that we’d better have the ceremony, at least. Keep the diplomacy going, give the villagers something to photograph.’ She clasped her bouquet firmly. ‘I’ll decide at the altar.’

The Doctor sighed and shook his head.

The car screeched to a halt outside the church, and the Doctor ran round to open the door for Bernice. Dorothée and Keri hurried from the church to help the bride with her train. The villagers in the church grounds and on the pavement cheered and applauded, and threw bouquets, which Roz swiftly started to gather up.

Chris clapped Jason on the shoulder. ‘Told you.’

‘Yes. . . ’ Jason looked at his approaching fiancée dubiously.

Annie made a signal to Miss Tiller the organist, and the first notes of ‘Here Comes The Bride’ piped out. The mumbled conversation inside the church settled down into a respectful silence.

Annie made sure that the Doctor was holding on to Bernice’s arm, with both bridesmaids behind her, and that Jason’s best man was beside him. Then she led them all towards the altar. The guests leant out of the pews, craning to see the bride, and there were appreciative murmurs. Bernice had her veil down 194

over her face, which was just as well, she thought, because otherwise this lot would see the bewildered look on her face. She glanced at Jason. He was looking pretty scared, too.

Annie walked solemnly to the lectern, and smiled at the congregation.

‘Goodness, the old place is full. Haven’t seen it so packed since the abortive lynching the other day.’ She glanced at the Bishop, and, with a little clearing of her throat, returned to the text. ‘Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the marriage of Bernice and Jason. We’ve got to know both of them well in the last few weeks, and, while

they have some wonderful and strange friends, many of whom we're pleased to welcome to the Anglican fold' – she nodded up at the giant insects, reptiles, Martians and hamsters – 'we ought not to let that obscure the central fact. That they are two young people who love each other and wish to affirm and solidify that love in the institution of marriage.'

Bernice blinked to stop her eyes drying out. She felt as if she was going to faint. Again.

In the cellar, things were moving, things that tripped and stumbled across the bricks, as more and more of them struggled out of a hole in the wall and flopped on to the floor.

But still none of this could be heard above.

'Let's begin with one of Bernice and Jason's favourite carols, "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem", as shown in the order of service. Typically unseasonal, but that's what you get with time travel.' Annie, conscious of trying not to look like some sort of compère at a cabaret, indicated with her hand the frontmost pew. 'Leading us will be O'Kelly, Ronald and Rudolph, the Isley Brothers.' The congregation didn't applaud, much to Annie's relief. The Brothers got to their feet, and made eye contact with Miss Tiller.

'One. . . two. . . three. . . ' breathed O'Kelly, and launched into the hymn.

A moment later, the Brothers' soulful voices were drowned out by the raucous but enthusiastic collision of the village choir and a dozen UNIT soldiers.

Annie's eyebrows rose heavenwards as she sang. She looked across at the happy couple.

They were both looking very frightened indeed.

Doris was watching the Brigadier sing. His hands were firm on his order-of-service card, and he sang heartily, but his eyes were dull, somehow. As if most of his energies were going towards ignoring pain.

'The hopes and fears of all the years are gathered here tonight,' Doris sang, and suddenly she found herself crying, hopelessly and helplessly.

Standing beside her, Kadiatu touched her shoulder gently, and looked enquiringly at her. Doris took up her hanky and blew her nose, and managed to whisper to her: ‘I always cry at weddings.’

The crowd somehow made it to the end of the hymn, though by no means together. First past the finishing post were the Isleys, who ended with a perfect note, only to be swamped by a raucous, dying cry that faded from the UNIT

men. The Ice Warriors hissed in last, their sibilant voices echoing around the church as silence blissfully returned. One of the Charrl made a noise which Annie took to be a sneeze.

With a sense of foreboding, which wasn’t helped by the grim looks on the faces of the bride and groom, Annie thanked the Isleys and turned to her sermon. ‘I’d like to talk about peace for a moment. Peace on Earth, peace with other worlds. Peace is God’s ideal, the condition that He created us for. . . ’ She glanced up, and saw the Travellers sitting in a back pew, smiling heartily at her. Heaven knew what the aliens, with whatever gods they had, were making of this.

She caught the eye of the Doctor, standing placidly beside Bernice, and suddenly felt a little better. He was nodding, almost imperceptibly, as if she’d said something that he’d suddenly found to be true.

She continued, feeling a little stronger about this sermon. She’d been sitting up all night with it, thinking of James, and the Doctor, and suddenly being part of history.

‘In the last few years, we’ve all seen enough strife. We’ve seen a new set of rules drawn up, rules under which it was fine to cheat your neighbours, to make use of violence, to kill. We’ve all had to live in that darkness, and, in that time, we’ve all had the opportunity to see that darkness within ourselves. It’s there. We can’t ignore it. To do that is naïve. But what we discover, when we look into the pit of ourselves, is this.’ Her eyes met the Doctor’s again. ‘That though we are often caught up in violent situations, we are creatures of peace.

Although we find ourselves in a world where darkness is all around, we persist in shining. We cannot help but shine. That’s the great thing about us, about us all, not just the humans here. That’s why we’ve survived the naïveté of childhood, and the terrible awakening of these recent years. That’s why we’ll keep on going, and keep on having new adventures. I’ve always wanted to say this at a wedding. . . it’s the

opposite of what I get to say at a funeral.' She leant heavily on the golden-eagle lectern and felt Saul's approving presence.

'In the midst of death, *we are in life*.'

She waited a moment, and then smiled at the congregation. 'End of sermon.'

* * *

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The cellar was full, the wall demolished. The creatures that were revealed stood there, a great crowd of them.

And then they headed for the stairs.

Annie rubbed her hands together, feeling rather gratified by the pious silence that had followed her sermon, broken only by the occasional sob. 'We now move to the marriage ceremony itself. Would the bride and groom and their attendants come forward, please?'

Neither of them moved. She looked at them. She widened her eyes at them.

She made a little beckoning movement with her fingers.

Finally, grudgingly, the happy couple moved forward. They weren't actually looking at each other, Annie realized. All in all, these were bad signs.

She couldn't help but clear her throat before continuing, very swiftly. 'If there is anyone present who knows any good reason why these two people should not be joined in matrimony, would they make themselves known now, or never speak of it again?'

Normally, this was a formality that Annie would skip over in a breath, but this time she looked up. There were a few smiles amongst the crowd. Mike Yates was looking sternly at Denon, who had a look of angelic innocence on his face. Danny was quietly wrestling to stop Kit putting his hand up. They stopped as they caught sight of Annie looking at them. 'Very well –'

'Stop!'

The shout had come from the back of the church.

Everybody turned to look.

Jason was standing there, clad only in his boxer shorts. He was covered in dirt. He was pointing at the other Jason, the one by the altar, who was staring back at him in shock.

'That's not me!' the new arrival cried. 'She's marrying the wrong man!'

Bernice looked between them, open mouthed.

The creatures in the cellar had reached the door into the vestry, and were streaming through.

Bernice was turning frantically from side to side. The new Jason had run up to the altar, and grabbed her arm, which had made the other one grab her other arm. They were both trying to tug her in their respective directions.

'I don't know who you are, but I'm the real Jason!'

'No you're not, I am!'

'I am!'

' *I* am!'

'Quiet!' the Doctor interceded, pulling both of them off Bernice.



'Thanks,' she muttered. 'I was about to make a wish.'

'You both say you're the real Jason?' The Doctor addressed the two Jasons.

'Yes!' they shouted together, glaring at each other.

The congregation was staring at the two Jasons, muttering and speculating loudly to one another. Annie raised a finger, conscious of the Bishop in the front row, whose eyes were boggling, and tried to restore order. 'Now, hold on –'

From the vestry burst a crowd of people: Braxiatel and Hamlet Macbeth and Ishtar and many others, all looking confused and desperate, all running into the church, shouting.

All already sitting in the pews.

The congregation started to get to its feet, shouting.

The Doctor turned, and raised his hands. ‘Stop!’ he shouted.

From outside there came a rumble, like an earthquake. The church shook from side to side. People fell into the aisles, and Bernice found herself clutching both Jasons. Dorothée grabbed Keri and rolled her into a corner. The two Adjudicators remained on their feet, staring in horror at the duplicates who were rushing at them, not with any malice on their faces, but only confused, questioning expressions.

‘Something is happening!’ chorused Saul, his bells ringing and clashing against each other chaotically. ‘Something in the graveyard!’

The Bishop struggled to his feet in the front pew, and made his way with difficulty, across the rocking floor, to the altar where Annie stood. ‘Annie!’ he called. ‘May I –?’

‘What?’ Annie gasped, tripping across the room and sprawling against the wall. ‘Yes, whatever. . . ’

The Bishop took up a place at the eagle lectern, and put his hands up, his voice suddenly commanding. ‘My children! Please, please listen to me!’

Despite the confusion of the multiple duplicates and the, now receding, earth tremors, the congregation quietened and paid attention to the little man at the lectern.

He smiled indulgently. ‘As you all know, I am the Bishop. . . ’

He grabbed his chin and ripped a mask from his face, tossing it across the church. ‘And you will obey me!’

There was suddenly a stubby weapon in his hand, pointed straight at Bernice. He grabbed her by the arm and jammed it into her cheek.



The Doctor stepped forward, nodding in understanding. ‘The Master. I should have known.’

‘Indeed, Doctor, so you should!’ The evil Time Lord smiled a familiar smile.

‘Now, all of you, put your hands up, or Professor Summerfield is going to go on a very long journey. Vertically.’

The two Jasons both stumbled towards the Master. ‘If you hurt her,’ they raged, ‘I’ll. . . we’ll –’

‘Oh be quiet,’ the Time Lord cackled. ‘Shortly, Mr Kane, neither you nor your most ineffective cloned double will be in a position to do anything except obey my will.’ He gazed at the congregation, his eyes becoming large with the power of his mind. ‘Look at me. You will obey me. You will –’

‘Hem.’ The voice came from above.

The effect stopped. The Master blinked.

‘Not in my church, you don’t,’ said Saul. ‘Doctor, would you please do something about this person?’

‘What?’ the Master looked up desperately. ‘What is that?’

‘The unexpected,’ purred the Doctor, playing with his lapels. It’s always the same with coincidences – as with any sort of faith.’

‘You wait all your life for one.’ The Doctor popped his head around the church doors.

‘And then, to your infinite surprise. . . ’ The Doctor leant on the entrance to the vestry.

‘Three come along at once!’ The Doctor popped up from behind the font.

The Master looked at the four versions of the Doctor with growing horror.

‘Don’t come any closer!’ he warned. ‘Thus far, I have shown a considerable degree of leniency towards you and your friends, Doctor. Do not force me to employ harsher methods.’

‘We wouldn’t dream of it, would we?’ The Doctor grinned happily at his doubles, who agreed, grinning and waving back, with a multiple flutter of fingers and scarves. ‘We’ve already put you to so much trouble. You were up to your own quiet business in the graveyard, experimenting with the Bloom that you’d encouraged Lord Tasham to hoard all these years –’

‘It is him!’ Tasham, flanked by his double, got to his feet, pointing angrily at the Master, his other hand to his brow. ‘I’d. . . forgotten. He told me! Years 199

ago! He told me to steal the drums, gave me the equipment to do it! And I thought I was helping the environment.

‘Don’t be hard on yourself,’ Holmes murmured to him. ‘Your epiphany and change of heart remain.’

‘I gather that Holmes and his accomplices stumbled into your TARDIS,’ the Doctor continued, wandering about the church like a lawyer in a court. ‘They only gained entrance because you’d switched everything off. Stealth mode.

Silent running. Hardly a TARDIS at all. So you didn’t show up on my detec-tors. You’ve been treading carefully, haven’t you?’

One of the other Doctors produced a tiny mannequin from his pocket, and held it up to the light, brushing feathers and the debris of a magpie’s nest from the little body. ‘Your android, I believe. Known to us as James. Full of Tzun mind-alteration technology. Which interfaced with my Tzun technology and went haywire, making people do all sorts of odd things. Apart from Kadiatu, of course, because she’s different. Which is why you destroyed it.’

‘Indeed, Doctor,’ growled the Master. ‘I merely required some time to finish my experiments. I didn’t anticipate the arrival of this maladjusted couple and their wedding plans. I have learnt to be only mildly surprised when you arrive to disrupt my work. But this time you bring with you a full platoon of UNIT

troops, numerous armed aliens, an Ice Warrior battlecraft, a couple of Time Lords and Sherlock Holmes! You have excelled yourself!’

‘Oh, thank you,’ the little Time Lord mumbled shyly. ‘But it wasn’t me. I didn’t know you were here. It was the Fortean Flicker.’

‘The Fortean?’ The Master’s eyebrows shot up, and he allowed himself a bitter chuckle. ‘How ironic. My own diversion has been my undoing. Hoist by my own petard!’ He jerked the weapon tighter against Bernice’s cheek as he noticed Savaar making a movement that could have been an order. ‘I wouldn’t advise that. Any attack on me stands a good chance of killing the bride.’

‘You are without honour,’ hissed the Ice Lord.

‘Be that as it may, I still have no reason to harm any of you. As long as you do exactly what I say. We’re all going to go out into the graveyard. . . ’

Doris looked warningly up at the Brigadier as he moved slowly from his seat.

‘Don’t,’ she mouthed. ‘Please.’

The old soldier looked at her warmly, and then caught Kadiatu’s eye. The woman from the future quickly nodded, and leant forward to whisper in the ears of Blake and Braxiatel, who were sitting in the pew in front.

A moment later, Blake leapt to his feet. ‘A miracle!’ he cried.

Brax stood beside him. ‘Where?’

‘No!’ cried the various Doctors.

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The Master flicked a finger along his device. The double of Ishtar, who stood looking scared next to Blake, shrivelled and vanished with a crunch and a blaze of violet energy.

‘There was no need for that!’ roared the Doctor, striding up to the Master, and so further shielding the Brigadier from his view.

The old soldier had dropped to his knees, gritting his teeth against the pain, and had crawled to the end of the pew. He unholstered his pistol, grateful that he’d decided to leave it on his dress uniform. The lads had left their rifles in the anteroom, beside the Ice Warriors’ weapons. His old eyes were still good enough for this. All he needed was one clear shot.

‘Doctor, even by your standards, you are being soft-hearted!’ the Master complained, his eyes never leaving Blake and Braxiatel as they sat down. ‘That young woman was a very crude clone, created through the Kilbracken Tech-nique. A rough copy, so to speak, with the barest trace of memory, and nothing approaching true consciousness. These. . . zombies were created when you and your friends so foolishly ventured into the graveyard before one of the eruptions.’

‘Eruptions?’ the Doctor by the font asked.

The Master sighed, as if regarding the copy as not worth talking to. ‘It knocked all of you out. I swiftly swept the area with my Tzun memory-wiping beam, and had to grab that wretched drone before it flew off. But we are running out of time. Now –’

The church shuddered again as a new earthquake rumbled under it.

‘What’s in the graveyard?’ shouted the Doctor.

The Master stumbled back against the wall, still clutching Bernice. His eyes were fixed on the floor, which was bulging and stretching impossibly, as if something was forcing its way up from the cellar below. ‘This is your fault, Doctor!’ he called. ‘If I could have stabilized it, finished my experiments –’

With a great roar, a towering column of flesh burst through the floor.

The crowd screamed and panicked, running in all directions and knocking the pews over, oblivious to the Master’s threats. Atop the swaying mass of grotesquely deformed human muscle, there was a head – a growling, dead parody of a living face.

The face of Lieutenant Anthony Rupert Hemmings.

The Doctors gazed at it in horror as it swept about like a snake, the jaw working to some spasming, jumbled instinct. ‘You’ve been toying with a genetic loom from Gallifrey,’ the Doctor by the font growled. ‘Trying to create a new body for yourself!’

‘Out of the best possible material!’ the Master shouted. ‘That brain had been subjected to more interstitial and psionic radiation than any I had pre-201

viously encountered. With the Bloom infused in the ground, and the Loom reconstructing the genetic codes, I was so close to success!’ He took careful aim with his Tissue Compression Eliminator, and fired at the thing, but it only angered the vast mass of plasma, more and more of which was oozing into the church.

‘What can stop it?’ shouted the Doctors, clustering together beside the Master.‘Nothing!’ the dark Time Lord muttered. ‘It’s designed to be indestructible.’

The Brigadier, still lying under his pew, had been as surprised as anybody else by the eruption from below. As the congregation ran variously for the door, for their weapons and towards the monster, he

managed to avoid the chaos and steady his aim. He'd shooed Doris towards the door, having, in the end, to order Kadiatu to drag her there.

He fixed his sights on the beast's eye, and fired.

The human head atop the limb of flesh disintegrated, but the mindless shape flailed on, more and more tentacles bursting out of the slabs of the floor.

The UNIT soldiers and Ice Warriors opened fire together, having run back into the church from the anteroom. The building echoed to the crack of rifle fire and the scream of sonic cannon. But the creature still warped and splattered its bulk across the floor. From the doorway, withering Silurian eye-beams simply shone off it. Jacquilian and Sanki stepped forward past the reloading soldiers, concentrating on the beast before them, claw in claw.

Máire hopped up from cover, and blasted the shape with her Dalek gun, but all to no avail. The thing seemed to be simply growing, feeding off the Bloom that suffused the soil under the church.

The Doctor – the original Doctor – growled at the Master as he heard the screams of panic from the outside of the building. 'Do you see what you've done with your meddling? These people will never trust aliens again!'

'I care not for your puny objectives, Doctor! Our only concern now is how we may escape. . . '

Dorothée, having made sure that Keri was safe behind a pew, launched herself back towards Cwej and Forrester. The two Adjudicators were making a slow retreat, Ishtar on Cwej's arm having run to him. Roz had, typically, a weapon on her, not that it was having an effect.

'I haven't got any Nitro Nine!' Dorothée called, gazing up at the bulk of the creature above them. 'Just when we need it most. . . '

* * *

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A roll of flesh flailed against Jacquilian, and he fell, as a tentacle wrapped itself around his ankle and started pulling him towards the mass.

‘No!’ cried Sanki, hopelessly, as his friend was yanked from his grasp.

The Brigadier stood up from his position on the floor, feeling the rush of adrenalin that his implanted glands had given him. That would have such a cost, afterwards. Probably fatal. Ah well.

He ran past a clatter of flailing tentacles, towards the Silurian, as the limb of flesh pulled the reptile man swiftly towards a mouth that had opened up in its bulk. ‘Hang on!’ the old soldier cried.

At the door, John Benton tried to wrestle Doris from running back into the church. He and Yates had been helping people out of the door. ‘Alastair!’ cried the woman. ‘Don’t! For God’s sake, let somebody else do it!’

The Brigadier reached the reptile man, and threw himself on to the floor beside him, one hand grabbing the corner of a pew, the other grasping Jacquilian’s claw. The tentacle tensed and started to pull against them. ‘Now,’ he said, wincing under the strain, ‘hang on. We just have to wait until the Doctor comes up with something.’

Ishtar cried out as a sudden projectile tentacle slapped out of the writhing mass of flesh and attached itself to Chris. Roz and Dorothée immediately started battering it. The Jasons ran to their side and started to help, trying to pull the sticky flesh from the fabric of Chris’s shirt cuff.

‘Doctor!’ shouted Dorothée.

‘Doctor!’ shouted Bernice, as the Master desperately increased the pressure on her cheek.

‘Doctor!’ the Brigadier called, as more miniature tentacles shot out from the main body. He gave a desperate yank, and Jacquilian sped free. ‘Off you go,’

called the Brigadier, shoving the Silurian, stumbling, towards the door.

As he did so, a tentacle slapped around his own leg. He tried to pull it free, but fell, more and more of them whipping around his body. His hand was snatched away from a pew by another one, and he found himself slithering swiftly across the floor. He looked back to Doris, and saw, through the violence all around, that she was safe, screaming in Benton’s grasp.

A mass of tentacles flailed into the way of Yates and the other UNIT men as they ran forward, cutting them off.

Up ahead of the Brigadier, a mouth had opened in the flesh. The tentacles angled him towards it.

'Not on your life!' the old soldier growled, and started to thrash against the tentacles with all his might.

* * *

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Ishtar watched helplessly as Chris was spun out of the grasp of his rescuers, and impacted with the monster. Tentacle after tentacle swiped over him, until he was wrapped close to the bulk of the thing, being manoeuvred towards the same mouth that the Brigadier was now on the fringes of. 'Get out of here!'

Chris cried. 'Get away!'

'Doctor!' Ishtar called. 'Help us!'

The Master couldn't resist a chuckle at the Doctor's expense. 'Your companions are calling to you, Doctor!' he exulted. 'Who can save them now?'

The Doctor glowered at him darkly.

Then he walked swiftly forward.

And his steps were certain.

The Doctor arrived at Ishtar's shoulder. 'Ishtar, only you can stop this.'

'No, Doctor, I can't, I don't know –'

The Doctor grabbed her by the shoulders and bellowed at her. 'Only you can stop this, Timewyrm!'

The look of shock on Ishtar's face was replaced by one of anger. 'You dare!'

she screamed. 'You dare manhandle –'

'I dare!' the Doctor hissed at her. 'Look!' He pointed over her shoulder.

The Brigadier had vanished inside the monster, his hand being the last thing to disappear into the mass. At the doorway, his wife was screaming. Chris was being angled towards the gaping mouth, still struggling against the tentacles.

The Doctor shook Ishtar. 'Emily lost her psychic abilities, because you used her as a power source. You're at home in the TARDIS, you bring Chris gifts from across time! I saw that watch! You have the power of the Timewyrm!'

'The things just appear! I can't, the power frightens me!' Her voice changed.

'Time Lord! Why should I help you?'

'Because you love. Because you can love. Because the man you love is about to die, my best friend is about to die, unless you do something about it!'

'I don't love, I am. . . I'm Ish. . . I'm –'

' *Do it!* ' bellowed the Doctor.

Ishtar spun on her heel and stared, helplessly, at Chris as he fell towards the maw of the monster.

Then she clenched her fist. 'No.'

The church had filled with white.

Everything hung in nothing.

There was a sound like truncated thunder.

Everybody fell.

* * *

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And then, they all woke up. Where the monster had been, there was just a steaming hole. Chris staggered away, on the edge of it, his arms swaying at his sides.

Little bits of plasma started to fall like rain from the rafters.

Ishtar opened her fist, and stared at her hand.

The Doctor played a paradiddle on her shoulder with his fingers. ‘Oh good,’

he grinned. ‘Yes, I thought you could do it.’

The Master looked to his left and right, still clinging to his hostage.

‘Well,’ he murmured. ‘It seems that the Doctor has solved our little problem for us. So, Professor Summerfield, I wonder if you’d care to accompany me back to my TARDIS.’ He started dragging her towards the vestry, picking his way over the rubble.

‘You can’t just wander in and disrupt my wedding like this, you bearded git,’

Bernice shouted. ‘Look at this dress! It’s ruined!’

The two Jasons picked themselves up and ran forward, standing at some distance from the Master. ‘Let her go,’ the fully dressed one called. ‘I know you created me, but let her go. We’ll let you get away.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ agreed the Master, at the vestry door. ‘But I think that the Professor here would make an excellent hostage against the next time that the Doctor happens to interfere in my plans, and a most excellent travelling companion, so –’

‘Oh, bloody Nora!’ Bernice flexed her arms, and sent the Master flying over her shoulder.

He hit the ground hard, with a surprised yell, but instantly jumped to his feet.

So she caught him across the jaw with a neat right hook.

He stumbled back, towards the two Jasons, blinking and trying to aim the TCE at Bernice.

The dirty, near naked Jason hit him, so hard that it spun his head round.

The Master crumpled, the TCE falling from his hand.

Bernice rolled up the sleeves of her wedding dress, grinning proudly. ‘That’s what I call teamwork.’

Doris ran forward to the crater, and knelt beside it, panting. ‘Alastair!’ she yelled desperately. ‘Alastair!’

John Benton and Mike Yates ran up to her, and comforted her. Benton was openly weeping, a look on his face that dared anybody to comment on it.

‘Leave it,’ he muttered through clenched teeth. ‘That was the right way.

Saving lives. Saving alien lives.’



Yates put his hand on Doris’s arm. ‘John’s right. It’s how he would have wanted it.’

Doris put her hands up to her face.

Three Doctors gathered around Bernice, who was trying to choose between the two Jasons, both of whom were fussing over her.

‘It could be worse,’ one of the Doctors ventured. ‘There could be two of you.

The eruption of Bloom the other night must have only caught some of us.’

‘It took their genetic information on board,’ another Doctor added, ‘and then settled back into the soil. The clones grew like potatoes. Mindless things, apart from us, of course. We climbed out of the graveyard this morning.’

‘But he. . . these. . . ’ Bernice indicated the two Jasons. ‘Whichever one of these is a clone isn’t mindless.’

‘Ah,’ another Doctor added. ‘But he was created by the Master deliberately, after much experimentation, if the limbs in the hut are anything to go by. The others will fade away, but he won’t.’

‘But why should the Master bother creating a clone?’ the near naked Jason asked, gazing in astonishment at his double.

‘Oh, as part of his plan to try to stop you and Bernice getting married. He decided that, if he could bring a halt to the wedding, he could finish growing his new body in peace.’

‘What plan?’ Bernice asked. ‘I mean, how –?’

‘Ahem,’ Dorothée appeared beside the two Jasons. ‘I believe that one

of these men is mine. Which of you doesn't like garlic?'

'I do,' said the Jason in evening dress.

'Ah. . . oh. . . hmm,' said the Jason in boxer shorts.

Dorothée took the arm of the fully clothed Jason. 'The other one's your future husband.'

'No!' Bernice cried. 'Absolutely not! Oh, I see!'

'Post-hypnotic commands, channelled through James.' The original Doctor arrived, smiled, and grasped his lapels happily. 'Now, I'd better see how Ishtar's getting on. I left her with –'

'Alastair!' the wail echoed across the church.

The Doctor's face fell. 'No,' he muttered. 'I thought I knew how he died. . .

The Fortean Flicker!' He turned and ran towards the pit, crying out in anguish:

'Brigadier!'

A number of people had now gathered by the edge of the pit. Benton had leapt down into it, swinging from the edge for a moment before jumping into the cellar below. Now he was lifting the body of the Brigadier up through the hole, many hands helping him lift the limp form out into the ruined church.

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Doris was weeping uncontrollably.

'Brigadier. . . ' the Doctor growled, wringing his hands. 'Saul, can't you –'

'I am not divine, Doctor. I can do nothing.'

The body came up into the light, and was hauled up on to the side of the hole.

Those watching took a step back. The last traces of whispy Bloom were drifting from the body, a mark of its passage through the flesh of the creature.

But there was something else.

The Brigadier looked young. His hair was dark again, his face unlined, his hands smooth and straight.

Doris bent over him, sobbing, and put her head against his chest.

He opened his eyes. ‘Tears, old girl?’

She leapt up, with a yell, and looked down at him, panting. ‘You. . .

you’re. . . ’

‘Alive.’ The Brigadier gently sat up, and raised an eyebrow at the Doctor.

‘So this is what it feels like, eh Doctor? Can’t say I care for the experience, but still. Captain Yates, is everybody evacuated?’

‘All taken care of, sir.’ Yates saluted. ‘But now you’re young again. . . would you please stop calling me Captain?’

Friendly hands helped the Brigadier up, and Doris hugged him, much to his discomfort. The Doctor folded his hands together behind his back, and looked at the now-young soldier with mock severity. ‘That wasn’t supposed to happen,’ he said. ‘From now on, I’m going to be very surprised by the way your life goes.’

‘Well, Doctor. . . ’ The Brigadier surrendered to a long kiss from his wife, and then broke off to address the Time Lord again. ‘I suppose the universe enjoys the occasional happy ending.’

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The Wedding, Slight Return

The Bloom-created clones had faded away. The Charrl had explained that they thought having the groom tied up and left far away from the church was all part of the ceremony. Jason, they confirmed, had escaped only after some frantic communication with the junior Charrl left behind while the representatives went to the wedding. His clone, for his part, declared himself to be free of the Master’s instructions, which had consisted mainly of an urge to mate with Dorothée.

Dorothée had told him that he didn’t have to be free of everything.

The Doctor had held a quick deprogramming session, with Saul’s help,

in the vestry, freeing Bernice, Jason, and Chris (who had been given a dose of severe nonchalance) from the hypnotic effects of the android. The Master was in the village police station's lock-up.

The now young Brigadier had marched him across the village himself, delighting in the use of his muscles. Scared villagers had asked him what was happening, and he'd replied: 'The world's been saved from this villain, with the help of our friends from outer space.' And they'd cheered him, and he had to flick some confetti from his shoulders.

In a church with a great hole in its floor then, with sunlight and fresh air streaming in through the shattered windows, Bernice and her Jason, now in a borrowed suit, stood before the altar. Great crowds of villagers looked in through the gaps, and the congregation stood amongst the shattered pews.

'Do you, Bernice Surprise Summerfield, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband?' Annie asked.

Bernice glanced at Jason, and whispered, crying: 'I do.'

'Do you, Jason Peter Kane, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?'

Jason paused, and took a deep breath.

Benny glanced at him again, appalled this time.

'I do,' he said firmly.

He took the rings from Chris, and slipped one on to his own finger. Then he reached across, gently took Bernice's hand, and pushed the ring on to her finger. 'I really do.'

She started to laugh silently amongst the tears. 'I love you,' she mouthed silently, holding his gaze, and being utterly lost in it, the two of them looking 209

at each other, as if the church and altar and ceremony weren't there, but the wedding was something that they themselves decided, with this look.

'Then,' Annie concluded, with a fair measure of relief, 'I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.'

Slowly, the happy couple folded into each other's arms, and kissed so long that the congregation, and the villagers in the spring sunshine beyond, burst into applause and laughter.

'You may stop kissing the bride,' Annie added. 'At any time.'

210

A Warm Reception

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** Reader, I married him. Eek, you may think, or Good Grief, or any number of swearwords. I can only say that it was something I really wanted to do, to have someone love and honour me for the rest of my life. Unlike Dorothée, I always rather hoped for one true love, and, at this point in time at least, I think I may have found him. Whee! Hey nonny no, and all that!

Actually, judging from the look on Dorothée's face that afternoon, as we had our first crack at the buffet, I think I may have done her a service as well.

(Note to future readers: a favour, dears, a favour.) She was looking at her cloned Jason like she'd suddenly found something rather wonderful, and had shrugged off Mike Yates's sly suggestion that he didn't look like a clone to him.

Though I still had to suppress a shudder at the idea of the girl bonking the groom to measure his trustworthiness, I couldn't help but smile as I watched them together on the top table. I told my Jason that it was a pity I couldn't have both, at least for the wedding night, and he looked at me with such a mixture of doubt, incredulity and lust that I spilt my champagne.

The Doctor had popped out to the TARDIS, to fetch the guests who'd only been invited to the buffet. He came back about ten seconds later, with a small army of them. It would take time to get around that lot, but it made the huge hall feel nice and full.

The catering was excellent, by the way. My congratulations to Captain Traylen, a much better chef than soldier. They finally got to give their salute, as Jason and I left the church, with a row of soldiers to attention on one side, and Ice Warriors on the other. The noise of guns going off, when you're under it, is terrifying, but I do wonder that they had the ammunition left. The villagers threw so much confetti that I shall still be picking it out of my trousseau next week. I threw the bouquet, and it went straight towards Dorothée, a really good shot on my part, but she headed it on, and Roz finally got it. She gave me such a look. We got back into the car, just for the form of it, and John took us for a quick lap of the village before turning back into the church hall car park.

Judging by the vast dimensions of the structure that used to be the church hall, I gathered at that point that the Doctor had added some extra space to that, too. Just as well. When we got inside, the place was packed, over sixty 211

tables surrounding the stage and dancefloor, and waiters with cropped hair running about everywhere. The guests were kind enough to give us a round of applause as we entered, so I restrained my urge to run straight over to the presents.

All in all, dear reader, I think we had rather more trouble getting married than Cinnabar Flynn and Byerley St John had, which has to be some sort of record. I can only hope that you found the experience entertaining.

[ *To be continued.* ]

Ishtar tried to get on with her starter, trying to ignore the inquisitive looks of her foster parents and her boyfriend.

'So,' said Chris, breaking the silence, 'I'm going out with the Timewyrm, am I?''No,' Ish blurted. 'I've just... always been able to do odd things with time.

And when I get angry, it's a bit like there's somebody else in my brain, being really bitchy and egging me on. But it's still me.' She looked hopefully at Peter and Emily. 'I haven't changed.'

'We know, love,' Peter sighed. 'But why didn't you tell us?'

'I thought you'd be afraid. When I was a kid, I thought you'd kick me out.'

Emily grabbed her and held her to her breast. Ish dropped her fork. ‘Don’t be silly. Bloody hell, if being around the Doctor’s taught us one thing, it’s. . . ’

‘Yeah?’ Chris cocked his head on one side as he heard her trail off. ‘What?’

Emily managed to look him in the eye. ‘It’s to have a jolly good try at accepting the unlike.’

‘Thanks, Mom,’ said Ishtar.

Emily opened her mouth, and couldn’t close it for a long time. So she enjoyed being hugged, and finally surrendered only to the chocolate cake.

The small blue elephant that the Doctor had introduced to everybody as Provost-Major Beltempest was acting as MC, something that the Time Lord, after patting him on the back, had thrown him into. Now, looking around nervously from the stage, he blew his trunk loudly and called: ‘My Time Lords, ladies, gentlemen, and those of indeterminate gender!’

The room silenced. The being continued, rather more gently, ‘I should like to introduce the first of our speakers this evening. The Doctor.’

The guests found chairs, and shuffled to sit down, making the hall echo with the noise of shifting furniture.

The Doctor, who had been deep in conversation with Alexander Shuttleworth, looked surprised, but got up, and wandered up to the microphone on the stage, grinning sheepishly.



He tapped the microphone, sending a painful jab of feedback around the room. He put a hand to his mouth. ‘Oh dear. Sorry. Now. . . ’ He fumbled in his pockets. ‘I have a few telemessages and e-mails that have been sent by people who couldn’t make it today.’ He produced a sheaf of papers, and read from them.

‘“Much joy. Hope all goes well. Why didn’t you invite us? Love, Tanith and Gabriel. . . ”’

There was a shriek from the top table. Bernice had dropped her glass and was laughing hysterically. She hiccuped and waved for the Doctor

to go on.

‘“Bestwishesforyourfuturetogetherbut youwillfallbeforethemightofourinva-sionforcebythewaywhat sortofringsarethose?”’ He paused for effect. ‘“Love, the Cybercontroller, Telos.” This next one’s a telegram. “All the luck in the world. Stop. Would visit. Stop. But first have to kill every stinking Dalek in the galaxy. Stop.” And the bottom of that one is all’ – he held it up and flapped it – ‘sliced up.’

At the top table, Dorothée was looking a little sad as she listened to the Doctor, raising only the occasional smile.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked her Jason.

‘I was just thinking about Mum, that’s all. She said she was going to get here, but she hasn’t shown. Story of my life.’

‘Oh. I’d like to meet your Mum. I think.’

Dorothée laughed at his serious expression. ‘We’ve got to do some severe talking, right? I don’t even know you. I just made love to you a couple of times.’

‘Good way to start.’

‘Maybe. Tell you what, I’ve got a house, a very big house in the country.

Come back in time with me and we’ll work out if we’re gonna be together.’

‘OK. I don’t know where else I belong.’ Jason leant gently forward and kissed her.

Dorothée sighed. ‘If you’re good enough for Bernice. . . ’

The Doctor came to the end of his messages, and bowed to much applause.

He trotted off the stage, and the blue elephant took his place again. ‘While coffee is served, may I introduce the musical talents of’ – he spread his arm wide – ‘Jacquilian and Sanki!’

The two Earth Reptiles walked on stage, acknowledging the applause.

Jacquilian took up a place at the mike, leaning on the piano, while

Sanki sat down at it. ‘Hello, I’m Jacquilian and this is my friend Sanki. We’d like to play a song that we’ve zhooshed up all by ourselves, in honour of the happy couple.’



‘Oh, we were tickling the ivories for days over this,’ Sanki added.

‘Tickling we were.’

‘For days.’

‘And a one, two, three, four.’

Sanki began to play, in what sounded like a twenties lounge style, and a moment later Jacquilian chimed in with a spoken prologue.

*They say opposites attract*

*But it’s a fatal fact*

*That too opposite can equally be wrong.*

*It’s a very awful riddle*

*This searching for the middle*

*But grey areas are often best for songs. . .*

*So –*

He began to sing.

*Try to take the rough with the smooth, Mrs Kane; Try to get some yang with your yin;*

*There’s nothing fun in roughing it*

*Or you’ll both end up stuffing it*

*And he’ll dump you before you can dump him.*

*His temper may be fissile*

*And his chin might be all bristle –*

*Though leonine, we couldn’t call him brave.*

*And though you set the dog on us,*

*We won't call him monogamous –*

*What reputation's ours we care to save.*

Bernice roared, and grabbed Jason's arm. But he looked a little hurt, so she kissed him until he didn't.

*But he's got a place in your heart,*

*More than the sum of his parts*

*And, curse yourself but love him so you do.*

*There's a soft and gentle centre*

*In his impedimenta,*

*But finding it's like wrestling with glue.*

*Try to take the smooth with the rough Ms Summerfield –*

*Try to get some moi with your vous.*

*Just don't try to grin and bear it*



*Or you'll just trip and tear it.*

*At least these days you've got the choice of two.*

The other Jason spluttered out his coffee, laughing, and Dorothée wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

*You might drink like you're a pelican,*

*In which case it's just as well he can*

*Carry you home from a night out in your cups.*

*And though your rows get shriller,*

*That's a sign He'll never kill Her,*

*And all the downs get balanced out with ups.*

‘What?’ Bernice cried, feigning anger. ‘Are they saying I drink too much?’

Sanki slowed the song, and Jacquilian turned to address the top table directly.

*But in the end it’s mystically,*

*That tragedy breeds comedy,*

*And romance springs from such unlikely roots.*

*You both know what you’re about*

*And you shouldn’t get a moment’s doubt. . .*

*From two camp lizards dressed in morning suits!*

He bowed as the room burst into applause, and Sanki stood up from the keyboard to join him. They hopped down from the stage, waving happily to the crowd. The elephantine alien spouted champagne from his trunk in praise as he took his place again.

‘Excellent. Who’d have thought it?’

Chris’s speech was mock serious, as he pretended to fail completely in his attempts to list Jason’s and Bernice’s virtues. Once Jason had got past his initial paranoia, he started to laugh along with it, but Bernice got the feeling that he was still rather hurt. She’d only just started to get to know him properly.

Which was probably just as well.

When Chris had finished, the alien MC introduced the Isley Brothers, who came on in matching purple suits. They lined up in front of the microphone, to great applause, and launched straight into a thigh-slapping version of ‘Shout’.

‘This Old Heart of Mine,’ followed, which almost had Bernice in tears again.

She leant over and whispered to the Doctor: ‘Still think this is the best Isley Brothers’ song?’



He smiled a secret smile. ‘Oh yes. And if you hadn’t agreed, how

different things would have been. . . ’

The song ended, and O’Kelly paused, while the other two got their breath back. ‘Well, this is the weirdest gig we’ve ever played. Like I said when we got here, it’s good to see the world’s still got its act together, all these years on. Good to see the brothers and sisters here too. Even if one of them was, like, an evil android.’ He smiled for a moment at the laughter of the crowd. ‘I believe in grace, like the Reverend Annie does, and it’s ’cos of that, after much thought, I wanted to do this. This is “Summer Breeze”.’

Most of the crowd applauded, unaware, but the Doctor leapt to his feet.

‘No,’ he muttered. ‘They mustn’t.’

‘Why?’ asked Bernice. ‘Don’t you like that one?’

‘He’s ignored my advice. Discovered the lyric. So he doesn’t write it. This is a song written by Time.’

‘And is that bad?’

‘It could be disastrous. It means that the rules are ripped up, that anything can happen.’ He started to edge around the table towards the stage, where O’Kelly was patting Ronald on the back, reminding him of the chord changes in the new lyric. ‘I have to stop him.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Muldwych leant over from the table behind him. ‘It’s going to be fine.’

‘Is it?’ The Doctor turned to the small man and glowered at him. ‘Tell me.

But be careful.’

‘This is a wedding,’ Muldwych purred, saluting Benny with his glass. ‘And at weddings, let’s say we’re all allowed a certain licence.’

The Doctor looked at him for a moment more. Then he sat back down. ‘I hope so,’ he muttered.

‘Summer breeze, makes me feel fine, blowing through the jasmine in my mind. . . ’ the Isleys sang.

Emily found herself distracted from the song by thoughts of construction, and character, and endings. She quietly picked up a

napkin from the table, and the pen from her pocket, and started to scribble.

When the song ended, O'Kelly gazed at the audience long and hard, trying to fix the scene in his mind. His eyes settled on the face of Danny Pain, spilling ale from his glass as he called out and applauded. There was something about the man that still looked boyish, still looked very vulnerable.

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O'Kelly shivered, aware, suddenly, that outside the building there was a world, a world full of change. The thought should have made him feel cold and mortal, but, oddly, he found himself smiling.

When, in the future, people asked him about his faith, he would describe this moment, in the most general terms, and say that he'd got a little taste of coming grace, just then.

'Thank you,' he told the audience. 'Good night.'

Bernice and Jason took the microphone next, for their joint speech. They looked at each other fondly.

'He doesn't look like much,' Bernice began. 'But –'

'Excuse me.' Jason poked her in the ribs. 'But this whole reception seems to have been about how crap I am. I'm quite good, really.' He pointed out his duplicate in the audience, who was caught snogging Dorothée. 'Aren't I?'

Dorothée raised her thumbs. 'There, you see,' Jason folded his arms across his chest. 'I'm so good that they should make a lot more copies.'

'And every good boy and girl could have one for Christmas.'

'If Mrs Kane allows, then –'

Bernice held up a finger enquiringly. 'Wait a minute. Mrs Kane? Professor Summerfield-Kane, if you please. And you can be Kane-Summerfield.'

'What?' Jason looked aggrieved. 'If you think for a minute that I'm going to sound like a firm of chartered surveyors just to heal your *wounded pride* –'

' *Wounded pride*?'

‘Yes! You’re smarting because you finally met something you couldn’t *cope* with!’

‘Can’t cope with? I can cope with you. Many women couldn’t, many women *wouldn’t*.’

‘Oh *wouldn’t* they?’ The happy couple had turned to face each other now, squaring off as if they were about to start trading blows.

The audience had started to mutter and look at each other pensively. Annie got to her feet. ‘Excuse me –’ she began.

Bernice and Jason turned and pointed at her, grinning. ‘Got you!’ they said.

Together.

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Everybody’s Welcome at the Wedding

The air that afternoon was like a rare amber wine, and Bernice found herself intoxicated by the warmth and good humour of the assembly. She was thread-ing unsteadily between the guests when she turned at the sound of a throaty chuckle. He was propped against the wall, his lithe, leathery hide swathed in some kind of linen robe.

‘Well, ape,’ he said softly, ‘you seem to have prospered.’

Bernice scrutinized the stranger’s single, burning eye, and the powder-blackened socket set on the other side of his snout. ‘Liso!’ she cried delightedly, running across the room with her hands outstretched. The Ismetch warrior’s claws closed around her arms and the crest on his head retracted in the form of a greeting Bernice had come to know well during her time on the doomed planet of Betrushia. She resisted the temptation to say ‘How’s things?’

and instead scrutinized Liso with a frown of mock disapproval. ‘Not quite the fine, military figure I used to know and loathe,’ she said, tutting gently.

‘Well, the soft life gets us all in the end,’ said the former Portrone, looking her up and down. ‘I think you’ve put on a little weight. Is it contentment?’

Bernice laughed and then felt a wave of very genuine emotion steal

over her. ‘Yes, Liso. Yes, it is.’

‘Then I rejoice for you,’ murmured Liso sincerely. There was something in his voice, something in the back of his solitary eye which told Bernice that the pain of losing his home world had not gone away, would never go away. But then, how could it?

She wanted to stay longer, to talk about their adventures, but she felt a hand on her arm, pulling her away into the mêlée. She waved to Liso and he saluted back before disappearing into the laughing crowd.

She turned to see who had abducted her, and instantly recognised the lean looks and scarlet bow-tie of Professor James Rafferty. He had a glass in his hand.

‘Lovely wine,’ said James, exchanging kisses.

Bernice grinned. ‘Don’t ask the vintage.’

‘Oh, I won’t. Questions like that tend to be tricky for the Doctor, I know.’ He grinned back. ‘I leave slippy quantum stuff to my colleagues. Personally,’ he added, gesturing around the room, ‘I’m enjoying the variety of cultures here.

I want to have a word with some of them.’



‘Well, I know you’re interested in what makes them tick. Or squeak, or burble, or emit intelligent odours.’

‘And that charming husband of yours. Reminds me of someone. . . ’ He peered across the room, and then quickly in another direction, obviously convinced that he was seeing double.

‘Don’t we all? Anyway, I’m glad the Doctor could invite you.’

‘Indeed.’ James frowned, remembering. ‘But he told me that he had a condition. . . ’

‘Yes, a nasty little rash; he picked it up on Audron Gamma. Soon cleared up.’ She laughed. ‘Don’t look so horrified, James. I’m Josephine King.’ He still didn’t catch on. ‘Jo King?’

‘Ah. Yes.’ Rafferty cleared his throat. ‘I meant that he, ah, wanted me to do something for him. In the future.’ James sighed. ‘Problem is, he wouldn’t tell me what. Do you have any idea?’

Bernice slowly shook her head, wondering for the first time about what the future, when they all got out of this room, was going to be like. She kissed Rafferty quickly on the cheek again, and continued on her way amongst the guests.

He stood in the shadows in the corner, his long coat seeping into the gloom around him. He was watching the crowd swirl past, peering at the world from behind twin black moons. He seemed frail and insubstantial, on the edge of the room, on the edge of everything.

Benny began to push towards him when she saw him, her eyes fixed on him, afraid that he would melt before she could get to him.

'Hello, friend,' she said as she reached him.

The man looked up, a guilty smile stretched across his thin grey lips. 'Hello, Benny.' He pulled his hat from his head, bowing slightly and displaying sweep-ing white hair, streaked with black. He coughed, his fingers twiddling together. 'Ah, congratulations.'

'Thank you.'

'I thought I should come. I've brought you something, a gift for the occasion.' He stretched a thin grey hand deep into his pocket. It emerged as a fist, clenched so tight that the grey was bleached from his knuckles. 'You've one of these already; I hope you don't think it's presumptuous.'

The fist blossomed, opening into a flat palm. Benny recognized the ring that sat there, the ring with an inset jewel, a jewel the colour of blood.

'My,' she exclaimed, 'but I'm running out of fingers.'

'It's not for wearing,' the grey man said softly. 'It's for the future.'

She plucked it from his palm and stared into the jewel. Her face stared back at her, shattered into faded scarlet pieces.

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'This really isn't yours to give, is it?' she asked.

'No, but it is really yours to take. Do you like it?'

( *Her flesh, broken and magnified by each facet of the jewel. Dying-flesh, worm-feed, growing older and closer to death with every second.* )

‘Yes,’ she said, sincerely. ‘It’s very nice.’

The grey man nodded and shuffled, perhaps with some small satisfaction. ‘I can’t stay long, I’m sorry. There are so many people. Sooner or later, I would be recognized.’

‘Well, thanks,’ Benny said. ‘For everything. I’m glad you could come. Will I see you again?’

‘Yes,’ the man replied. He made for the door, not speaking, not looking back. Benny waited until she was sure he was gone. Her fist closed round the grey man’s gift and she turned back to the others, to rejoin the living.

‘Bernice!’

‘SaRa!qava,’ laughed Bernice, turning to locate the source of the cry. ‘Is that really you?’

SaRa!qava spread his arms wide and did a twirl. ‘What do you think?’

‘You look good as a man.’ The change was actually quite subtle: saRa!qava’s waist was thicker, his shoulders a tad wider, and of course his breasts had gone. He had become a tall, slim man with long black hair with a silver sheen to it, big brown eyes and a wide, mobile mouth. There was, surprisingly, not a hint of androgyny about him at all.

‘I got all broody after iKrissi was born,’ said saRa!qava, ‘but I didn’t want all the trouble of carrying a child around.’

‘Who’s iKrissi?’ asked Bernice.

‘Dep’s first baby –’ saRa!qava clapped a hand over his mouth. ‘Oops,’ he said.

Bernice glanced over at Chris. His arm was around Ishtar. ‘You don’t mean. . . ’

‘Yes,’ said saRa!qava. ‘And an exact copy too.’

‘Oh.’

‘You must promise not to tell him.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t,’ said Bernice. ‘Have you got a picture?’

SaRa!qava unclipped his earring and lifted it in the palm of his hand.

A ten-centimetre hologram of a child appeared. It looked to be about one year old, had blonde hair and was definitely a girl. The grin was unmistakably familiar.

'I thought you said an exact copy?'

'Dep made a mistake during conception. It's an easy enough thing to do. Oh yes, God sends its love, so does the villa, who turned sentient right after you left. Oh, and I need to get another picture of Roz and Chris for the figurine 221

maker at the Mote In God's Left Eye, and a holo of you and Jay!Son rubbing noses. . . for everyone back at the sphere.'

Bernice kissed him on the nose before moving on. 'I'll make sure.'

There was a middle-aged woman at the edge of the crowd, someone Benny didn't recognize at all. The archaeologist looked for clues. The woman was human – not just humanoid – and about Benny's height and build. She was wearing a neatly tailored wool suit, one from this timezone, give or take a decade. The woman was nervous and, judging by the way she was spending a lot of her time looking down at the floor or into her sherry, she was here on her own. She could hardly be blamed for feeling out of place. Benny decided to sidle up to her.

She held out her hand. 'Hello, I'm Bernice Summerfield, and this is my wedding. Are you a gatecrasher?'

'Bernice Kane, surely,' the woman replied. 'I'm a Bernice, too.'

The remark baffled Benny for a moment, then realization dawned. 'You're a future me, aren't you?' she exclaimed, delighted. There was a vague resemblance, she thought.

'A what?'

'From my future,' Benny explained excitedly. 'You know, untimely plucked from your joint in time. Scooped out of your timestream like a fish in a. . .

but of course, you'll remember all about this meeting. I suppose you're here to prove that I make it through to tomorrow. I thought the Doctor would do something like this, a real *This Is Your Life* job, with me as a baby, and a teenager, and. . . '

She realized that the woman was waving her hands frantically in an

attempt to stop her speaking. Benny shut up.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the woman said. ‘I time-travelled the slow way. The Doctor gave me an invitation at my christening, fifty years ago today. I’m Bernice Doras, Anne’s daughter. My mother named me after you. She. . . couldn’t make it.’

‘Good heavens. Happy. . . er. . . anniversary or something.’

‘I brought you a present.’ Bernice Doras held out a brown paper package, and Benny took it from her and unwrapped it carefully. Inside, yellowing, was one of Benny’s own diaries, the one she’d left behind in Guernsey. There was a familiar musty smell, one that made Benny feel a lot older, suddenly.

‘It was sent back to the island from Germany in nineteen seventy-two.

There’s a note.’

Benny had already found it, a small slip the size of a calling card. The handwriting was shaky, uncertain:

*Miss Summerfield, your future is almost here. 1976, was it not? I* 222

*know now I will not be joining you there. Here is something of your past. Oskar Steinmann.*

Benny tucked the slip into the front of the diary and looked up, suddenly sober.

‘Well, that’s that.’ She broke into a grin. ‘Now, Bernice, we can’t have you standing here by yourself. Did you keep hamsters as a girl?’

‘Er, yes. Two – at first. Paul and Ringo.’

‘Right, well, if you’d like to come this way, there’s two people you’ll get on famously with. Don’t go on too much about sawdust and wheels, though.’

SaRa!qava had cornered the Brigadier and Doris, and started talking to them quite unconcernedly.

‘To be honest, I changed into a man especially because, as you probably know, Benny is mostly, if not utterly, hetero. Still, Jason isn’t bad looking, so I may be in with a chance tonight. What do you think?’

Doris and the Brigadier each waited for the other to say something. Then they looked at each other. Then they waited some more.

'Oh, for goodness' sake!'

Bernice's attention was suddenly drawn away from introducing her name-sake to Kitai and Keri, and towards a familiar falsetto wailing. From the corner of her eye, she saw Jason, staring in astonishment at the person responsible.

She remembered her own initial surprise at the phallic body belonging to the Galactic Federation's representative from Alpha Centauri. Tugging Jason with her, Bernice hurried over to where Centauri was delicately trying to balance a paper plate in four of his six hands, while the other two were popping food in the general direction of his midriff. He had dropped the contents of two of the plates all over his yellow gown.

'So,' she murmured, 'that's where his mouth is.'

Beside Centauri were two orange males with three stubby fingers on each hand: the Kantryan Commissioner and his young son, Damakort. They were trying to clean the gown with paper napkins, but had only succeeded in smudging the food further. With a sigh, Bernice yanked a glass of sparkling water from Ruby Duvall and tipped it on to a convenient pile of napkins.

'Here, Centauri, allow me.'

'Oh, Professor Summerfield!' screeched Centauri. 'How beautiful you look!'

Kort smiled at Bernice as well, and she realized that a good couple of years must have passed since their adventure on Peladon. The boy had almost become a man, and his eyes reflected his admiration of Bernice in ways she'd 223

never seen before in the young official. 'Good to see you again, Professor,' he said.

'May I present Jason Kane?' Bernice replied quickly, indicating her husband with a wave of the hand.

'An honour, I'm sure.' Centauri bobbed. 'Have you heard all about our time on Peladon, during its last days as a federated world, Mr Kane? It was a terrible few weeks, and your wife was so brave, because –'

‘Ambassador, I’m sure the happy couple have more interesting things to talk of right now.’

Bernice didn’t have to turn to recognize the figure directly behind her. The aged, rasping voice told her all she needed to know. With a whoop of joy that caused Centauri to change colour three times, she dropped the damp napkins and flung herself on to High Lord Rhukk, squeezing him tightly. ‘I know it’s not a very Martian greeting,’ she whispered in his ear, ‘but you getting here has just made my best ever day that bit better.’

Rhukk gently lowered her and saluted, arm across chest, to Jason. ‘Mister Kane, you have been blessed with the most charming human companion possible. You have my congratulations and my envy.’

Jason saluted back, equally solemnly. ‘Thank you, *Dhdurr*.’

Bernice stared at him in surprise. He just smiled. ‘I’ve been talking to Savaar. He gave me a couple of lessons in High Martian.’

‘I am impressed,’ said Rhukk. ‘My brother is not normally so forthcoming.’

He nodded to Bernice. ‘ *Shsurr*, you obviously taught him much during your. . .

close association.’

Jason sighed, and clapped his hands together. ‘It’s obviously all over for us; I’ll get the divorce papers for Monday, and just pop over and see Keri. Excuse me –’

Bernice stopped him. ‘Stay. I fancy you more than any Ice Lord.’

Rhukk proffered Bernice a gift, a small piece of red rock. ‘You recall our last conversation on Terras Delta?’

Bernice stared at the rock, slowly turning it in her hands. ‘You remembered?

You got to the ruins on Karnas Prime?’

‘As promised, the first piece of rock I removed from the tombs. A gift to you with all my affection.’

Bernice felt the emotion of the day swell over her once more. ‘Thank you, Rhukk. This means. . . a lot.’ She curtsied, took Jason’s hand, and

moved off to meet more guests.

But she managed to turn back to Kort and wink at him.

Benny was about to take Jason over to greet Nathan Li Shao and his crew by the buffet when she was suddenly aware of a disturbance behind her, and of a surprised shriek as somebody launched himself at her back. She reacted 224

too late and struggled to throw a squirming weight from her shoulders. An arm locked about her throat and deathly tones sounded in her ear. 'This was to have been a day of celebration, but instead, it will turn to tragedy. So says Doctor –'

She drove an elbow back, intending to catch her attacker's stomach. He was shorter than she'd estimated, which made the blow all the more effective. He crumpled and she rounded on him. 'Cruk! It's you!'

The boy's makeshift cardboard armour was askew, and he'd tangled himself in his black cape. The elastic band which had held his mask on had snapped and watery eyes gazed painfully from beneath a mop of blond hair.

'Whatsisname, from the Land of Fiction,' said Benny.

'It's Jason,' he grunted, seemingly put out by her memory lapse as much as by her vicious jab. 'The same as your husband.'

'Which is as far as the resemblance goes,' Jason growled. 'Why the frankly quite pathetic costume?'

Jason gave him a look and addressed Bernice once more. 'Don't you remember Doctor Nemesis? I mean, I know he was your enemy and all that, but if I'd come as the White Knight, it might have been a bit awkward, what with you two getting on so well. This being your wedding day. . . '

'What are you going on about?' Benny cut in. 'No, scratch that. I'd rather you told me what you're doing here.'

The ex-Master of the Land of Fiction looked surprised. 'But we're friends. . . '

'You killed me!' Benny protested. 'Twice! That's once more than Gabriel and Tanith managed, and at the time I regarded that as an unbeatable record.'

The AFKATMOTLOF scrambled to his feet with what Benny assumed was supposed to be an engaging grin. ‘Ah, well, the Doctor called to ask how I was. Forgive and forget. He said that was what this was all about. He told me you were getting married, and what with me having used you in two stories, I feel like I know you pretty well, and I did so want to be here, and I just sort of insisted, ’cos, well, I just love happy endings. . . ’

It took a moment for Bernice to register that his stream of words had ended.

She sighed and turned her back on him. ‘I hate all that self-referential crap,’

she grumbled.

SaRa!qava let go of his plate as if he expected someone else to catch it, and looked very surprised when it crashed to the floor. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I forgot you people had such dumb houses.’

Nathan and Kiru were standing by the buffet, surreptitiously but industriously ripping off the silverware. ‘Wotcha, Nathan. Hello, Kiru,’ Bernice said, leading Jason to them.



‘Hello Benny.’ Nathan stuck a handful of cutlery behind his back. ‘Nice nuptial festival. Couldn’t understand that *Krikit* ritual for the life of me, but it was sort of fun.’ He gestured expansively with his free hand. ‘We were going to bring you presents plundered from the whole vast and glittery panoply of the galaxy, scintillating treasures such as would make your eyes pop out with joy and wonder and not to mention quite unconscionable avarice. But we forgot.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Kim, a little gleam of genuine warmth infusing his permanently sardonic features. ‘I just hope you know what you’re letting yourself in for. Take it from those who know.’

‘You’re married now too?’ Benny said. ‘Is everybody suddenly doing it?’

‘Not at this precise moment,’ said Kim, looking around the hall. ‘I think we’d have noticed.’

‘We’ve been Family for some of your weird and rather silly Earth years,’ said Li Shao. ‘It took the Doctor some subjective time to locate

the *Schirron Dream*, apparently. We were wandering through what he called the Proximan Chain Rafts when he found us.' He beamed proudly. 'Did you know we're expecting?

As a Family. We all do our bit. Sgloomi Po's thinking of turning himself into an entire nursery specially, after they hatch.'

Jason looked at the pair of reptile eggs in the thermal satchels slung over the two pirates' shoulders. 'Very nice. I like the mottling.'

'Where's the happy mother?' Benny looked around.

'She went off with Dorothée and her Jason, to talk body armour,' Kim told her. 'Pity we never met them before. Do you think they'd like to join our Family Cluster for a time?'

'Or possibly two times,' added Nathan.

'Well, you could ask,' murmured Benny, wondering what it was about Dorothée that had everything with a couple of synapses and a libido paw-ing the ground and moaning low. And could she have some of it, please? 'But we tend to be serially monogamous.'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,' said Nathan. 'Kinky beggars.'

Benny grinned back and squeezed Jason's arm. 'If you do it right.'

SaRa!qava had found Roz. 'I have something for you,' he said. He drew out a number of sheets of folded paper from his jacket and handed them to her.

'He sent a remote-drone round to my house with them. I don't know how he knew I was coming here.'

Roz unfolded the pages and read the first couple of lines. She sighed and quickly tucked them into her bodice. 'How is he?'

'We never see him. But I can take a message back, if you want me to.'



'Just. . . ' Roz paused. She caught sight of Holmes and Watson, talking animatedly with Lord Tasham in a corner of the room. Then she reached out, and silently touched saRa!qava's face, ever so gently, for a full minute. 'Just that.'

'I'll tell him,' saRa!qava whispered.

Jason had been dragged off by Alexander and Hamlet Macbeth, whose bom-bastic natures had brought them together in a sort of duet of loudness. They wanted to compare the reactions of him and the cloned Jason over a few more glasses of champagne, and Jason, rather foolishly, had pledged to drink himself under the table.

Bernice had thought of saying something about seeing double, but decided against it. She ran into Braxiatel on her way to fetch another glass for herself.

'I knew you'd be here, you know,' Bernice said.

'I wouldn't miss this for anything.' Irving Braxiatel raised his glass in salute.

'I meant, I knew you'd be by the champagne.'

He laughed. 'And what did you think I meant I wouldn't miss?'

' *Touché*.'

Braxiatel looked round the crowded room. 'I seem to know a lot of people here.'

'I'm not surprised. I doubt if so many of them know you, though.' She smiled.

'Indeed not.' He laughed. 'Indeed not.' He popped the cork of a new bottle and let the stream of bubbles flow down the side and over his hand. 'So, now you've married that man over there, do you have any more idea what he's like?'

Benny considered. 'No,' she said eventually, taking the proffered glass. 'But he loves me violently.'

Braxiatel nodded, half smiling. 'I hope you find out soon,' he said quietly.

'There may be questions.'

'There always are.' Benny drained her glass in a gulp. She smiled suddenly and radiantly. 'Nice to see you, and I mean that.' She leant forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Then, as she turned to leave, Braxiatel said: 'Your husband does have one distinct advantage, being married to an archaeologist.'

‘What’s that?’

‘The older he gets, the more interested in him you’ll be.’

Dorothée returned from talking with Leetha (who just happened to be by the doorway, looking out into the car park, waiting to see if any late guests were just arriving), and found Benny in a corner, gassing away with another face 227

from the past. Recognition was accompanied by a pleasant, fluttery sensation that swept over her as her eyes settled on those warm pink lips and floppy fringe. God, she was getting dirtier as she got older. The events around this wedding had convinced her that any thoughts of nunnery were just a glitch in a great romantic career. She glanced over her shoulder, saw that her Jason was with Benny’s one, and sat down beside Forgwyn. ‘Hey,’ she grinned. ‘Can I put my hand down your trousers?’

Benny giggled and slapped her wrist. ‘Please excuse her,’ she said.

‘I haven’t told you yet,’ Forgwyn said, glancing at Dorothée playfully. ‘You’re looking really. . . old.’

Dorothée put a hand on his knee, undeterred. ‘Pity you’ve narrowed your field. You could be a great switch-hitter. So what have you been up to lately?’

Forgwyn coughed. ‘Well, I’ve been going to lots of great clubs in Sector Six of the galaxy, really, and not much else. Never been to a wedding before. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask for days, that tall blond bloke – is he with that black woman?’

Benny laughed again. ‘Looks like a disappointing day for both of you.’

‘Ah, at last, the happy bride,’ a smooth voice said from behind Benny. She turned to find a lean-faced mulatto standing behind her, a broad grin creasing the little triple scar on his cheek. One empty sleeve of a vaguely ostentatious colonial uniform was tucked under his belt, and he proffered a wrapped package with his remaining hand. Even though it was wrapped, the package’s shape gave it away as a bottle. ‘Since these are happier circumstances, a little gift from home.’

‘Petion!’ Benny gave him a kiss on the cheek, and smiled wryly. ‘So, is this suitable for a wedding? I mean, is it more mind-control juice for keeping the new groom in line?’

Petion laughed. ‘Clairin, spiced white rum.’ He tilted his head. ‘Almost as bad.’

Benny glanced at Dorothée, remembering her having mentioned trying some. ‘Oh, “don’t smell it first”, right?’

Petion nodded. ‘Admirable advice.’

‘Is Howard here too?’

‘Unfortunately not; in our own time, he is teaching at Princeton, I believe.’

‘And you?’

‘My wife and I have a restaurant in New Orleans, would you believe?’

‘Well, don’t forget to leave a note of the address and, erm, date.’

‘Of course, but, speaking of my wife, I’d better join her at the buffet, before she starts to wonder where I’ve gone.’

Bernice took the bottle and shook his hand. ‘Have a nice time.’

He paused while turning to go. ‘I think that’s my line.’

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SaRa!qava was talking to aM!xitsa, which had now recovered its memory, and had dropped the owl disguise. The drone pushed a small cube into the humanoid’s hand. ‘That’s for you know who about you know what,’ said the drone.

‘I’ll make sure we know who gets it,’ said saRa!qava. ‘How’s life with the terminal woman?’

‘Interesting,’ said aM!xitsa. ‘You know how it is.’

‘You’re looking a whole lot better than when I saw you last,’ Bernice was saying to Kim Talevera.

The dark, compact young woman with the crown of black curls beamed back at her across the bread rolls. ‘Well, I could hardly have looked worse, could I?’ she replied with some feeling. ‘Next time, I’ll remember to eject earlier! Actually, it’s largely thanks to Shenn

prostheses that I'm up and about so quickly. In fact they've become quite a big thing since you left us. By the way, the main Shenn nest on Arden sends its congratulations on becoming a

"nest of two", as they put it. They're not exactly sure what a marriage means, of course, but they approve of any move in the direction of plurality!'

'A nest of two,' said Bernice, trying the phrase out, then chuckling at the way the Shenn mind worked. 'Yes, I rather like that.'

A hand tapped her on the shoulder. Benny turned as Kim wandered off, and didn't recognize the newcomer, a woman in a 1920s dress and cloche hat, until she spoke. Then she recognized the voice.

'Manda!' she said. 'You've changed too!' It was an understatement: the pale teenager, full of bitterness and fear, had turned into a bright, confident young woman.

'Ten years on,' said Manda. 'I was jolly surprised to see the TARDIS again.'

She grinned.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm studying to be a doctor. After what I saw on Q'ell, and Charles dying and everything, I decided that saving other people's lives wouldn't be a bad way to spend my own.' She paused. 'It's pretty gruesome, sometimes, and the chaps don't make it any easier. They don't like a girl trying to do it.'

It was Benny's turn to grin. 'Don't let them get you down.'

Manda looked at her hands, then said quietly. 'Life is trying, I suppose.

You've just got to make the most of it.'

Benny glanced to where her new husband and his clone were staring into each other's eyes as they threw back a pint of ale each. 'I intend to.'

Across the room, she also noticed, a young man with olive skin was beckoning to her. Bernice made her apologies and wandered up to him, trying to 229

figure out who he was as she went. ‘Go on,’ he said, as she drew up. ‘You’ll never guess.’

Bernice peered at him, opened her mouth, closed it again. ‘Sony,’ she said,

‘you –’

‘Benjamin,’ he said. ‘Benjamin Alvarez.’ He grabbed her hand. ‘It’s my thirtieth birthday. You look just like Papa’s photo, except much more *espléndido*.

Come on, he’s hiding behind a pie over here; he’s gone all shy as usual. . . ’

Benny looked around nervously as Benjamin led her over to where a man in his sixties was sitting in a chair, a plate with a piece of pie balanced awkwardly on one knee. ‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Professor Summerfield.’ They shook hands, a little formally. ‘I am extremely pleased to be here.’

‘I’m glad you made it,’ said Benny, with feeling.

In an alternative

timestream, she’d seen Cristián eaten by a god. And something even worse had happened to Hamlet Macbeth.

‘The Doctor even says he will be able to return me to Mexico in time to meet the deadline for my next article. I have something for you.’ Cristián clicked open a briefcase full of books. ‘I had just received the sample copies when the Doctor arrived. It is only a small thing. . . ’

‘It’s his first book,’ said Benjamin. Benny took the hardback, and looked at the Spanish on the dust-jacket. ‘ *Overcome Your Fear of Flying*,’ translated the younger man.

‘I have just sold the very first copy to Señor Macbeth,’ said Cristián, with a marvellously smug smile.

‘So,’ saRa!qava was saying to Savaar and Rhukk, while poking at a suspicious yellow dip on the buffet, ‘are those exoskeletons, or are you just pleased to see me?’

Bernice had spied two figures she didn’t recognize. A thin, austere young man in a black velvet robe was standing next to a woman – no,

a girl, a teenager

– wearing an almost tasteless floor-length robe in shades of red. But Benny must know them; why else would they be here?

Oh. Of course. It seemed such a long time ago. The planet Arcadia. From the days when time travel looked simple.

Jason had wandered back over to her. Her Jason. She could see differences already. He was much the worse for wear. She took his hand. It was warm.

'Husband,' she said happily.

'Yes, wife?'

She looked into his eyes and felt something inside her chest expand until it was almost painful. That seemed to have been happening a lot lately. She 230

knew she had a silly grin on her face and she didn't care. How can holding someone's hand make you suddenly feel stronger and more alive?

One person certainly didn't know the answer to that one. Got you foxed at last, Doctor.

'Come along, husband. Let's go and rescue those two. Don't mention brains or the Spinward Corporation. And don't even hint at the concept of dying young in order to stay pretty.'

As Benny and Jason threaded through the throng Elaine saw them. Her face lifted and she grinned, wide-eyed. Benny felt almost embarrassed.

'Bernice! Oh, Bernice, it's wonderful to see you. Are you very, very happy?'

'Almost to the point of unconsciousness. You're looking pretty good yourself, Elaine. I expect everyone tells you that you're growing up fast, so I won't.

Even though it's true. This is Jason, by the way. I seem to have undergone some pair-bonding ritual with him. I expect to wake up in the morning and find it was all a bad dream.'

'You must excuse my wife,' Jason said. He executed a formal bow and

brought Elaine's hand to his lips. Benny punched his arm. 'I wish I could say her condition is the result of the excitement or of over-indulgence in fizzy beverages,' he went on, 'but I fear she's like this all the time.'

'Ignore him,' Benny said in a stage whisper. 'He doesn't know it but later on his blood will stain the altar of the Nine-Breasted Goddess. Jason,' she added in a slightly more normal voice, 'this is Francis.'

'Hello.' Francis smiled. His happiness muscles looked out of practice.

'How are things on Arcadia?' Benny said.

'The war's going well,' Elaine enthused. 'Nerdany's conquered three other provinces. Francis is one of the Prince's closest advisors.'

'War?' Benny found she could still raise one eyebrow, so she directed it at Francis.

Francis barked a humourless laugh. 'Yes, I know. Quite apart from the destruction and the loss of human life, we're wasting time. I gave myself seven years and I've seen three of them swallowed up in devising ways to kill and maim.'

'Seven years?' Jason asked. 'That's not long. Why only – ah!' Benny's heel descended on his toes and he pretended a sudden interest in the roof-beams.

Francis gave Benny a twisted smile. 'Things haven't gone exactly as the Doctor recommended,' he said. 'I have some hopes of the next generation.

They'll live longer, at least, and may have time to acquire some wisdom. Our present leaders. . . ' He looked down, shaking his head.

'Don't be such a misery,' Elaine said. 'It'll be all right, Francis. Soon we'll win the war and then you can start your big scientific and technological initiative, or whatever you call it.' She turned to Benny. 'Francis wants to do a big 231

scientific and technological initiative,' she said. 'But actually I think it sounds rather dull.'

Benny couldn't think of a thing to say. Francis was almost thirty years old; as one of the last genetically altered generation on Arcadia, he could expect to live another five years at most. Elaine still had twenty

years. Twenty years of war, possibly. She's going to die when she's my age, Benny realized. She turned towards Jason, suddenly seized with panic because if she were to die now she would lose him. But he was there.

'If you're determined to slug it out you could always hire Dorothée,' Jason said, smiling broadly at Francis and Elaine. 'Only joking,' he added when he saw them recoil. 'Seriously, we'll ask the Doctor to pop back and visit you.

Anyway, it's been terrific meeting you. We ought to mingle, I'm afraid.' He leant forward conspiratorially. 'Get stuck into the booze – that's probably the best course of action. Have a chat to those big green buggers with the snappers on the ends of their arms. They'll tell you more than you want to hear about the philosophy of warfare.' He deftly side-stepped Benny's descending shoe-heel, caught her arm as she staggered, and whirled her away into the crowd.

'Those two are party poopers,' he said, 'and big-time.'

Benny giggled. 'At least they're not brain soup,' she said.

' *Vi ochin krasnaya, Benny!* ' came a familiar voice from across the room. 'You are very beautiful, Benny, I congratulate you!'

Benny turned away from Jason's raised eyebrows, and saw a tiny, fat old man grinning at her, a glass of vodka in one hand, a cheroot in the other. She frowned, not quite placing the face, now jowled and wrinkled, or the wispy strands of white hair on the otherwise bald head. And then she recognized the merry twinkle beneath the round spectacles, and she rushed forward and hugged the old man. 'Mikhail Vladimir Popov!' she said delightedly. 'Misha, you old goat! How are you?'

Popov released himself from Benny's over-enthusiastic hug, coughed with embarrassment, and smiled. 'I am very well, Benny. Although not so well as yourself, it seems. You look as young as the day I saw you last, in London in nineteen-oh-nine. And I –' he sighed theatrically. 'I am an ancient man of eighty-two. . . '

'Nonsense, Misha, you're still a spring chicken,' Benny reassured him and, for a second, felt a twinge of regret. She had never said a proper farewell to the amiable Russian detective all those years ago in London.

'It is good that you are once more friends with Smith. I remember that

when we last met –'

'That's all forgotten now. And I recently got to know Dr Smith a lot better. . . '

Benny grinned at the private joke. 'You still working for the Tsar?' She made a swift mental calculation. 'Whoops, I forgot, no Tsar.'

232

Popov sighed. 'Alas, things have changed so much for my country, as they have now for me. I left St Petersburg and moved to Volgograd. And now I have moved again, to London.'

'But Misha, I thought you loved the old country,' Benny protested. 'Why move to dolly old England?'

Popov smiled weakly. 'Smith was most insistent that I leave Volgograd in forty-two,' he said. ' *Ach*, or rather Stalingrad as we must call it.'

Benny halted an impulse to tell him how things were in 2010. In 1943, she knew, a million Soviets had died in the snow defending their city from the Nazis. Well done, Doctor John Smith, she thought. You're still looking out for us after all these years. . .

'But Benny, you have other friends waiting for you,' the Russian said. And then, for the only time in thirty-three years, Mikhail Vladimir Popov found the courage to kiss Bernice Summerfield, lady, on the cheek.

Roz looked exasperatedly at Chris. 'So the punk is the bus driver?'

Chris sank his head into his hands. 'All right, from the top. A nun and a punk get on to a bus. . . '

As Bernice passed one of the food-laden tables, she heard a large belch. Puzzled and irritated, she bent to glance under the cover. On his back on the floor was a large, heavy-set man in a very ill-fitting morning suit. His voluminous beard was matted with food, and his sleeve shiny from wiping his mouth with it. He had several bottles of beer beside him, and even more empties kicked aside.

'Great party,' he murmured, happily. 'I could grow very fond of this' – he examined the bottle blearily – 'Newcastle Brown.' Then he belched again.

‘Fancy some sex?’

‘Yes,’ said Bernice firmly. ‘But not with you. I’m the bride.’

‘Ah.’ The man examined her critically. ‘Bit skinny for my tastes, anyway. I like them with more cleavage.’

‘Marvellous,’ Bernice replied. ‘Since we don’t find each other attractive, let’s leave it at that, shall we? Just who are you, anyway?’

‘I am Gilgamesh!’ the man roared, making Bernice wince. ‘King of Ur, Uruk and just about everywhere else worth knowing. I am the slaughterer of thousands, the most renowned lover, and all-round party guy.’ He belched again.

‘Charmed, I’m sure.’ Rolling her eyes, Bernice straightened up. The Doctor knew some lovely people. Shame this wasn’t one of them.

‘Splendid party,’ announced the Brigadier, delighting in the easy way his muscles moved as he raised his glass. He’d had to borrow some trousers from 233

Chris, and his dress uniform jacket was now rather tight at the shoulders, but he didn’t care. He’d lost Doris somewhere in the crowd, but was still busy being the life and soul. Since no one else was making conversation with an elderly gentleman who was playing gooseberry in a corner of the hall, he thought he’d better undertake the task.

‘Are you with the bride or the groom?’ he asked.

‘In neither stance, signor,’ said the gentleman. His accent was rich Italian.

His silver hair and beard were long. There were flecks of paint on his red velvet tunic and he was tucking into a large plateful of chocolate mousse. He looked for all the world like Leonardo da Vinci. ‘I am in charge of the cake,’

he said, flourishing the spoon. ‘It should arrive in a moment.’

Bernice nearly missed them. She was picking her way through guests when over in a far corner she spied two figures, a man and a woman. They stood patiently, on their own. Bernice caught their eye and forced her way over to them. ‘Richard. Charlotte. You came.’

They embraced her and Charlotte kissed her cheek. ‘Congratulations, Bernice.’

They stood for a couple of minutes, just looking at each other, remembering their adventure together. Bernice saw that Richard’s hair was now tinged with grey. Fine lines had traced themselves over his forehead. Charlotte still looked exactly the same: a thirty-five-year-old woman.

‘How are you?’ asked Bernice.

‘A little overawed,’ Richard replied. ‘I sense ours is a very quiet voice here.’

‘Have you published your book yet?’

‘How did you. . . of course. Yes. Just the one. With a small but kind audience.’

Charlotte took his hand. ‘But there will be many more. Bernice, take this day. It will never come again.’

Bernice felt sad suddenly. They seemed remote, an echo from a very different life. Time had driven a wedge between them. ‘Take care,’ she said wistfully.

Richard and Charlotte smiled. ‘And you. Be happy.’

Rooky wood.

Ruby Duvall stood at a window in the corner of the hall, at the edge of the noise and the milling guests. Weddings depressed her. She stared out at the shapes of the trees as they swayed like friendly, ambling giants. Through the uneven pane of glass, certain branches would distort and magnify, the darker shapes of crows’ nest – tangled clumps like mistletoe – clearly visible. Rooky wood.

234

That phrase kept going through her head. She couldn’t think why. Reflected in the window pane was a familiar face amongst the strangers. A small face, comforting but distant. The Doctor. What was life like! Four years ago, she had wailed her heart out because he’d left without her. She’d wanted him to take her away from the life she knew. She thought she would always regret it

– that missed opportunity. But now.?

She looked through the reflection once more, out into the gloom. Light thickens and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood. She shuddered as the words came back to her. Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, while night's black agents to their preys do rouse. Shakespeare. Of course.

Learnt for the school play, a life ago it seemed. All-girls school. She'd been the Scottish king.

So that was it. It was all his fault. Hamlet. Macbeth. Weddings depressed her.

Benny had slipped outside to get a breath of fresh air. The sound of the festivities from the hall echoed in the cool night. The air out here was like wine, thought Benny. No, that wasn't right. The night air was helping her sober up, so it couldn't be like wine. It had to be something else. Something non-alcoholic. Coffee, maybe. But that didn't sound right. Nobody spoke about air like coffee, did they? Now that was a drunken thought if ever there was one.

Benny squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again. When she did so, as if by magic, a man was standing under a tree in front of her. Obviously he'd been there all along, but she'd only just noticed him.

The man came forward into the light, smiling. There was something familiar about the way he moved, and Benny was delighted when, after a second, she recognized him. It was Creed. Creed McIlveen. The memory of their experiences together was suddenly vivid in her mind. She could almost smell the liquorice tang of warlock on the night air. Creed stepped forward, smiling at her.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' she said.

'The Doctor tipped me off,' said Creed. 'I couldn't miss an occasion like this.

I had to pay my respects.'

'Respects? That doesn't sound like you. I can't remember you ever respect-ing anything.'

'Well, to kiss the bride then,' said Creed, and he moved closer to her, lowering his face towards hers.

Benny let him kiss her, his lips grazing her cheek. ‘You could have shaved,’

she said as he moved back, rubbing her face where his abraiding stubble had brushed against it.

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‘Sorry,’ said Creed. ‘I was in the middle of something when the Doctor called. I didn’t have time.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Benny. ‘You’re forgiven.’ Secretly, she was delighted to see Creed, and with the kiss. It was so different from the way her husband kissed her. It seemed somehow to reinforce and confirm her choice, all of her plans for the future.

‘Well,’ said Creed, a little awkwardly. ‘Good luck and all that.’ He started to move away.

‘Aren’t you going to kiss me goodbye?’

‘Hell, no,’ said Creed. ‘I might lose control.’ He grinned and turned away, waving goodbye to her as he went.

Benny stood smiling in the moonlight as he moved off.

‘Ladies, gentlemen and others,’ called the Doctor and gesticulated for silence.

The doors were flung wide and something vaguely resembling a multi-coloured baroque Dalek glided slowly into the hall. Bernice slipped in on tiptoe behind it, scampering like a panto heroine clutching her skirts to arrive beside Jason before the cake got there. He glanced at her questioningly, to which she gave only a bright smile.

‘The cake!’ proclaimed the Doctor with a nod to Leonardo in the corner.

The huge iced confection halted in front of Bernice and Jason. It was a sugar mountain tiered with layer upon layer of tiny pastry buildings, trees and figures. The summit was crowned by a strange capsule in which sat miniature images of the bride and groom.

Everyone applauded.

There was a whirring from inside the mountainous cake and a musical box began to tinkle the wedding march from *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Instantly the various tiers of the cake began to revolve in opposite directions. A flock of marzipan sheep moved across the upper slopes.

In a moat of chocolate sauce surrounding the base, a quinquereme of silvered almonds unfurled spun-sugar sails. Crystallized-fruit sea-monsters surfaced and dived puffing clouds of icing sugar.

The device on top of the mountain began to whirl blades of green angelica.

It rose gently from the summit – a perfect sugar helicopter carrying the tiny bride and groom round and round the hall above the heads of the delighted guests.

With a loud bang, the top of the mountain exploded. Amid clouds of coloured and flavoured smoke, chocolate sauce bubbled from the crater and streamed down the sides of the cake.

'Krakatoa!' cheered Dorothée.



'No, I base this on Etna,' corrected Leonardo over another helping of mousse.

With much glugging, the volcano began to tumble out dozens of tiny profite-role boulders, which collected and bobbed in the chocolate-sauce moat below.

'Amazing,' laughed the Brigadier.

Doris smiled, finding his side through the crowd. 'Just don't expect me to ask for the recipe.'

Bernice and Jason, with some trepidation, stepped up to the cake. Chris handed them a silver knife.

'Dear Leonardo,' Benny glanced over at him. 'Is it all right if we cut it?'

'What? But that is what it is for! Cut! Eat!' Leonardo wiped the mousse from his chin with his sleeve.

So Jason and Bernice lowered the knife together. The crowd applauded.

Kitai hopped up and snapped them with a tiny camera. He'd been

doing that all the way through the preparations, and the wedding, although the happy couple had flatly refused to get into some of his poses.

Bernice and Jason started to hand out pieces of the cake, wrapping them in napkins and making sure nobody got hurt by anything molten. The elephantine lawman that Bernice knew as Beltempest came hesitantly forward at the front of the queue. Beside him stood a hard-shelled alien with a metal eye.

'Hey, guys, I haven't said thanks for coming!' Bernice kissed the hard-shelled alien. 'Doc Dantalion, good to see you. And Provost-Major Beltempest, you old dog. Nice MC-ing. How's the Empire?'

The hard-shelled alien stared at her, apologetically. 'I'm sorry,' it said, gesturing to the elephant. 'He should have explained. . . '

'I didn't feel that. . . well, I didn't want to embarrass the Doctor. . . ' murmured the four-limbed creature.

The one-eyed creature sighed. ' *I'm* Beltempest. I've been body-beppled again for an undercover Landsknecht mission on the Birastrop home world.'

Bernice turned to stare at the elephant. 'Then you must be –'

'Dantalion,' the elephant replied, tapping its eye. Despite the appearance of flesh, Bernice could hear the ring of metal. 'Holographically disguised as Beltempest.'

'Why?' Bernice challenged.

'Why not?' Dantalion shrugged. 'It seemed like a good idea at the time.'

'Have your cake' – Jason handed them both a piece – 'and eat it.'

'Your slogan,' Bernice grinned at him.

The next person in the queue was somebody that neither Bernice nor Jason recognized. It was an old man in a silver Troifran cloak and two-piece suit.

Beside him was a strange, glowing humanoid figure clutching an empty napkin with a few crumbs in it. 'I don't know you, but I do know the Doctor. So 237

I'd like you to have this,' said the old man, handing her a book as he took his piece of cake. His accent was a curious mixture of galactic colonial and Welsh.

'Why, thank you,' said Bernice. She opened the book and read the fron-tispiece. It was a signed first-edition copy of *The Hobbit*.

'It changed my life beyond all recognition,' the old man told her.

Bernice read the book's subtitle out loud. '"There and back again".'

'That's right, my dear. Not so much a book, more a way of life.' He turned to the faintly effulgent figure at his side. 'Come along then, boy. Let's see if we can find ourselves a pint.'

The figure nodded, and produced from his mouth a perfect slice of cake. He put it in the napkin and handed it to Jason.

Then the two of them went on their way.

'I'll. . . just put that to one side,' said Jason.

They continued to hand out cake until they thought that the confection must be dimensionally transcendental. But finally, the end of the queue came in sight, and with it another stranger.

'Ma'am? Just wanted to give you my congratulations.'

A big man in a dark suit, old-fashioned in cut, but obviously brand-new, was last in the queue. He had a lined, pleasantly ugly face, and he was holding a snap-brim fedora.

'You won't remember me. The name's Dekker. Tom Dekker. We had a drink together one night. Doc's place in Chicago.'

Bernice remembered a smoke-filled saloon and the pounding beat of a honky-tonk piano. Hadn't she been singing the blues? A lot of bootleg liquor had been flowing that night. 'Of course I remember you. We were getting along fine – until Ace came along and broke things up.'

Dekker's face lit up. 'That's right. How is she these days?'

'See for yourself. She's one of my bridesmaids.' Bernice pointed across the hall.

Dorothée, in her bridesmaid's gown, was talking to her Jason by the door.

She looked young and relaxed, if a little sad.

Tom Dekker looked at her and remembered a girl Chicago hoods called the Lady in Black. Tough and wary, a wisecrack on her lips, a Browning automatic in her handbag. ‘She’s changed some.’

Bernice nodded. ‘She’s a lot happier these days. She calls herself Dorothée now.’

Dekker studied her for a moment longer. ‘She’s looking swell. If you get a moment, say I said hello.’

‘Say it yourself. You were pretty close.’



‘Different time,’ said Tom Dekker. ‘Different girl.’

He turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Alexander stared at saRa!qava, his eyebrows seemingly set in surprise. ‘Oh. . . ’

He considered for a moment. ‘Oh. Yes. I see. So the bus driver was the nun?’

SaRa!qava made a little noise in the back of his throat. ‘Allow me to explain it to you,’ he murmured, ‘over a quiet cocktail.’

‘Now that,’ Alexander agreed, taking his arm, ‘is the best news all night.’

With everybody eating cake, Bernice wandered away from Jason, and from all the people with their plates, and just enjoyed the atmosphere for a bit. As she sauntered through the crowd, she became increasingly aware of two empty tables. She tried to avoid them, but eventually found herself standing by them. ‘Empty tables and empty chairs,’ she murmured, remembering some of the faces, the words and the deeds of those who would never see her wedding day. She felt a tear in her eye.

‘Hi,’ said a voice. Bernice looked up and saw a girl, about fourteen, dressed in black, with dark hair cascading down her pale features.

‘Hi,’ said Bernice. ‘Do I know you?’

The girl smiled. ‘It’s my job to turn off the lights once everybody’s

gone.'

'You work for the church?'

The girl thought for a moment. 'No. I'm freelance.'

'Right,' Bernice replied. She didn't mind gatecrashers. 'Have I met you before? You seem familiar.'

The girl gave a deep, unnatural sigh. She opened her hand, revealing a red rose. 'One day. . . '

Bernice glanced back to the crowd, and saw, in a moment, Roz talking to Danny. They were both laughing. Odd to see Roz laughing.

She glanced back. The girl was gone. Bernice caught a glimpse of her skipping through the crowd, gently touching people's clothes as she went.

'One day what?' she asked.

'Your prince will come,' Jason said, appearing behind her to rub her shoulders.

Bernice took his hand. 'Come on,' she said. 'There'll be music soon.'

239

They Think It's All Over. . .

'I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. . . ' Danny glanced at Cob on the drums behind him, and Kit clutching his bass to the right. 'This is a song called

"Rheumatism". Onetwothreefour!'

Plasticine leapt into a frenzied thrash that lasted two minutes thirty exactly, but nobody really minded, except perhaps Jacquilian and Sanki, who were trying to persuade William Blake that they weren't stygian fiends when the aural assault began. They'd already fended off Kit's attempts to sign them for his label before he went up on stage.

The tables had been cleared away now, and everybody sat in a vast mass of chairs, back from a dancefloor that was, at the moment, empty apart from Sgloomi Po, who was pogoing frantically in the front, gradually metamorphos-ing from a blue oblong into a punk.

Plasticine rushed through four numbers, and then, panting, Danny swayed up to the mike. ‘We’re. . . incomplete this evening,’ he called. ‘Time for the original line-up. Mrs Kane?’

‘In this dress?’ Bernice stood up and glanced back at the audience.

The audience roared encouragement at her.

She shrugged. ‘You asked for it.’ Dorothée and Keri grabbed her train, and they ran together up to the stage, upon which Bernice leapt. ‘Okay,’ she told the band. ‘Jacquilian and Sanki, Isleys, get on up here, let’s do a number together.’

Danny looked at her as the others clambered on stage. ‘What can this lot play together?’

‘Chuck Berry?’ Ronald Isley glanced at the band as if still marvelling that this was what passed for music in 2010. ‘You’re a rock band, sort of. . . You gotta know Chuck Berry.’

‘’Course we do,’ Kit laughed. ‘As much as we know anything else.’

‘We are aware of Mr Berry’s work,’ Sanki added.

‘Well then. . . ’ And Benny took the musicians into a huddle for thirty seconds. They emerged, and she went to the mike. ‘We should so like to see you dance. Onetwothreefour!’

The Earth Reptiles at the piano launched into a rather rocked-up version of

‘You Never Can Tell’, with Kit’s bass standing in for the horn section.

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‘It was a teenage wedding and the old folks wished them well. . . ’ Benny began, with an ironic smile.

And the guests did dance, the Doctor going on to the floor with a sort of uneasy twist that he maintained with severe concentration, watched with humour by Chris and Ishtar.

Hamlet Macbeth had whisked Doris off and was jiving with her, when the Brigadier tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Excuse me,’ he told the Scotsman firmly. ‘That’s my wife.’

‘Oh. Of course,’ rumbled Hamlet, looking rather hurt.

The Brigadier gathered Doris up in his arms, and looked softly down at her as they danced a highly inappropriate foxtrot. She was smiling all over her face.

‘What’s this?’ the Brigadier asked. ‘It’s got a good beat.’

Doris looked at him, appalled. ‘Just because you’ve got your youth back, it doesn’t mean we have to start going to rock concerts!’

Hamlet was caught by Ruby as he attempted to leave the dancefloor. ‘Come on,’ she sighed. ‘You’ve always got me.’

Hamlet Macbeth patted her arm as she held on to him, and smiled, on the edge of contentment. ‘Fear,’ he said, ‘makes companions of us all.’

The reception continued as twilight settled upon the village, the lights from the hall spilling out in pastels of red and green as the band gave way to the disco.

Inside, Benny had found Watson, and was explaining something drunkenly to him. ‘So. . . I think it was because of James that I fancied. . . well, not exactly fancied. . . not that you’re not. . . ’

Watson poured her another glass of champagne. ‘Let’s consider the matter closed.’ He indicated Holmes, who was listening attentively to the conversation of the Ice Warriors. ‘This expedition, I believe, has been a lesson for both myself and my friend. I have rarely seen him so happy.’

‘Because he solved the mystery?’

‘Because he can be himself in every age.’

‘I’ll drink to that.’

So they did.

O’Kelly was drinking with Kadiatu. ‘I could get used to lime juice,’ he told her.

‘You shouldn’t. I travel through time and space. My job description kind of collides with Dorothée’s. After the truce of this wedding is over’ – she glanced across the room – ‘she’ll remember that.’

‘So why can’t I come with you, see a little history?’

‘Because’ – Kadiatu arched her back and looked him in the eye – ‘after what you did with “Summer Breeze”, you should be very careful about time. Do me a favour and don’t move in it. You’re too handsome to die without expecting it.’O’Kelly kissed her then, suddenly and passionately. She reacted for a moment, about to hurt him, but then relaxed into the kiss. ‘Time is on my side,’

he told her, letting go. ‘I’ll see you.’ And he left.

‘See you,’ whispered Kadiatu, staring after him with glee.

A newly recharged owl landed on her shoulder. ‘Woo,’ it said.

Muldwych, with the Charrl at his shoulder, worked his way through the crowd and just managed to avoid tapping the Doctor on the shoulder. ‘Well, we’ll be off,’ he said.

‘Oh? How?’

‘I’ve been talking with the Charrl. They’ve cleaned up your TARDIS and are ready to move out. We could do a merge programme to transfer any rooms and belongings you wanted, then. . . hop off.’

‘Hop off? In my older TARDIS?’

‘Exactly. I think I know an uninhabited planet where the Charrl would fit right in. And then I wanted to pop and visit Raphael, and see what he’s getting up to on Mimas. If that’s all right by you.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Is it all right by me?’

‘Oh yes.’ Muldwych nodded happily.

‘Then off you go,’ growled the Doctor.

‘Good party,’ one of the Charrl told the Doctor as they left.

‘Remember my gift,’ Muldwych called over his shoulder. ‘It’s for you. A mutual friend gave it to me.’

The Doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out the brown paper package. He glanced at it, and then downed his glass of brandy.

Ishtar had dragged Chris off to meet Blake, who had produced a quill and delicately signed his book with ink from a pot that Ish had pulled

from thin air.‘That’s great,’ said Chris, examining the book of poems in a quiet corner.

Cob had put the Stone Roses on the turntable, but the music was quite distant here.

‘You’ll have something to remind you of me after you go,’ Ish told him.

Chris frowned at her. ‘Ish, I –’

‘You’ll be off tomorrow. I know that. It’s all right.’ She laughed at his sudden pained expression. ‘Don’t get upset. Go and grab us a bottle of wine, and we’ll go and say goodbye properly.’

243

Slightly cheered, Chris headed for the bottle table. Ishtar let out a long breath. ‘And I, of course, have something to remind me of you.’

Emily flung up her hands at Bernice and Jason. ‘If you’d only asked me, I could have told you that he didn’t get up to anything with Miss O’Grady. She was much more interested in James. Which means – oh.’ Emily put a hand to her mouth. ‘What a really complicated plot. Glad it’s not one of mine.’

‘Is that what you’ve been writing down?’ Jason pointed to the napkin on Emily’s lap, covered in biro.

‘Ah, no, just household notes.’ Emily folded it away, guiltily.

The Doctor stood by a side door, a side door that hadn’t been there before the building was extended. He was looking at his companions, spread out across the room.

There was Ace. Dorothy. Dorothée. Sitting by the door with her Jason. She had a life of her own now, a big, complex, fractal life.

There was Roz, talking with Lord Tasham, the expression on her face showing that she was discussing politics or leadership.

There was Chris, being led out by Ishtar, carrying a bottle of wine. Roz would always need her partner.

There was Kadiatu, looking hard at Dorothée, wondering if soon the truce would be over and the small, local games of chess they both played would be intersecting and interrupting each other again.

And there was Benny, still dancing in the arms of her Jason, looking utterly happy. Content. The word had echoes of finality about it, of closure.

In a few hours, the guests would go back to their rooms, and they would wake in their own worlds and times, as the Jade Pagoda detached itself from the guest-house and the hall, and played out its programme. The ones that missed that could be collected quietly, as the Doctor's companions slept.

And there would be no goodbyes, no humans telling him to stay, no tears.

They could go on with their lives in safety. And he could go on with his, with just his cat for company.

A tear formed in the corner of the Doctor's eye, and hung on his cheek, suspended.

The door flapped in the evening breeze.

And he was gone.

He stalked like a rocket across the village green, the point of his umbrella pushing him forward determinedly. The police box stood before him, already alone on the grass, the door to an entirely different future, a future alone.

'Wait!' The shout came from behind him. 'Doctor!'



He stopped and turned. And pretended to be casual. 'Bernice.'

She ran across the green to him, hoisting her skirt up, her Doc Marten's kicking up the dew on the grass. 'I saw you sneaking out of my wedding.

Where are you off to?'

He looked at her, and then off into the distance, narrow lipped. 'It's late.'

She took both his hands in hers. He made himself face her, his frozen face thawing slightly.

'Thank you for this,' she said. 'Thank you for my life, for my wedding,

and my husband.'

'Bernice –'

'You can't leave.' She shook her head. 'It's out of the question.'

'But –'

'You aren't meant to be alone. None of us are. Now come on back inside, where there are people, where it's warm.'

The Doctor was silent for a moment.

Then he took her arm.

They walked back towards the hall, Benny tripping over from time to time.

'Are you. . . goodness, are you crying?' she asked.

'No.'

'Oh. All right.'

And they continued back towards the light.

Dorothée sat on the steps of the hall, her chin in her hands, her Jason beside her. The sound of 'World In Motion' was drifting out over the car park.

'And I certainly had fun in Tasham,' he was saying. 'But that's all over now.'

'There's no need to try and distract me,' Dorothée told him. 'It's okay. My Mum failed to do her bit again. It's a McShane trait: unreliability. You'd better watch out.'

'There might have been all sorts of –' Jason's words were cut off by the sound of a malfunctioning electric motor.

A battered old Mini puttered into the car park of the hall, its engine labour-ing. It stopped about fifty feet away.

Dorothée leapt to her feet. Jason slowly got up beside her.

The passenger door of the car opened, and a thin old woman in a very old coat got out. She blinked across at Dorothée, about to ask some

question.

But this time, Dorothée didn't hesitate. She ran across the gravel, kicking up pebbles as she went.

And it seemed to be a long way, that run. It seemed to last a very long time.

Fifty feet of gravel were time and change, adulthood and acceptance.

She flung herself into the woman's arms.

'Mum,' she said. 'I knew you'd come.'

245

Audrey McShane clasped the young woman hesitantly to her for a moment, and then surrendered to a full-blown hug. 'Of course I did,' she muttered. 'I thought you were dead. I missed you. I'm your Mother.'

The other door of the Mini opened, and a broad-shouldered man in a mac climbed out.

Audrey released her daughter enough to allow the man and Dorothée to see each other. The old woman took a deep breath, visibly choking back all manner of emotions. 'Dorothy, this is the man who's done so much for me.

He's turned my life around, girl. May I introduce my fiancé –'

But the man and Dorothée were already staring at each other in astonishment.

Dorothée finished the sentence with Audrey.

'Robin Yeadon.'

And then, for reasons that were going to take a long time to explain to Audrey, they all started to laugh.

246

Happy Endings

The Chancellery Guardsman carefully turned a dial on the device he held in one gloved palm. The object, its surface scratched and

pockmarked, rose from the hole that the Guardsmen had dug, under Annie Trelaw's careful eye, in the churchyard of St Christopher's. Numerous villagers watched as the golden loop, its diameter not much bigger than that of a hula hoop, hovered in mid-air.

Until Romana reached out and grabbed it.

She didn't look very Presidential that morning, in her floppy scarlet hat, tasselled skirt and frilled shirt, but she was the final spectacle for the inhabitants of Cheldon Bonniface in a season of wonders. The village was full of gossip about the monster, and the aliens were generally regarded as heroes who'd saved Cheldon Bonniface from the Master and his creature. The Doctor had spent the morning, while his companions were either absent or suffering hangovers, going from café to post office, indulging in gossip himself, making sure that nobody knew about Ishtar's part in the victory.

'The Loom of Rassilon's Mouse,' Romana breathed. 'You never know what sort of mischief these things are going to cause.'

The Doctor grinned at her, glancing around at the Guardsmen uneasily. 'Ah, well, that's why Rassilon stopped playing with mice, because of the monsters he created. Sometimes with a little help. . . I assume that the Master was considering a more sturdy body than the one he inhabits now. What are you going to do with him?'

Spandrell wandered over, looking miserable at being away from his beloved Citadel. He glanced down at his boots with some distaste, wiping grass and soil from one boot on to the other. 'He will be taken back to Gallifrey for trial.

It has been a long time coming.'

Behind Spandrell, Guardsmen were manhandling the struggling Time Lord into a helter-skelter, Romana's latest TARDIS design. He wrenched his head to regard the Doctor, and called: 'You have not heard the last of me, Doctor!'

The Doctor simply doffed his hat, and the villain vanished inside the craft.

The villagers applauded and booed.

Romana handed the Doctor a small metal box. 'The last piece of alien technology. Designed to short out disguise systems with a power surge. We found it on the roof of the inn and deactivated it.'

‘Ah, so that explains everything,’ the Doctor murmured, dropping the box into his pocket. ‘All in all, I think we had a very lucky escape. If the android had been able to encourage more violence like the fight in the pub, you might have had to step in to prevent a war.’ He brightened, and adjusted Romana’s lapels, to which she saluted, brightly. ‘President, eh? Been there, done that.

Didn’t like it.’

‘Personally, I think it rather suits me. I made my first speech the other day.

Read my lips, I told them, no more isolationism.’

The Doctor frowned, grasping his own lapels. ‘That sounds dangerous.’

Then he broke into a toothy grin. ‘But I’m sure you know what you’re doing.’

He reached out and pressed her nose, to Spandrell’s discomfiture. ‘Be careful, Madam President.’

The Presidential party made their goodbyes, and, with a final salute to the cheers of the villagers, got into their TARDIS. The helter-skelter faded away, and the Doctor wandered over to Annie, who was staring at the hole in her graveyard.

‘Goodness,’ she muttered. ‘It looks like I’m expecting a rush in trade.’

‘That,’ the Doctor murmured, ‘is exactly what we prevented.’

Keri had been running from shop to shop, buying every carrot in the village and throwing them into the sack of possessions she carried over her shoulder.

She’d wanted to finish her report on this weird planet – she had a lot to catch up on – but all she could find of Kitai was his small stills camera, and a box of developed shots beside it. The top photo showed Bernice, Jason and their attendants outside the church.

Most of the wedding guests, at least those from other worlds and times, had vanished from the village. Keri had only seen the Ice Warriors leave, on their platform, saluting a small crowd that had gathered on the cricket pitch.

She reached the TARDIS just as the happy couple did, done up in their best clothes for going away in, suitcases in hand. They both looked as though they hadn't got any sleep, and, far from being hung over, they had a look in their eyes that suggested they were still drunk. Beside them, pallets carrying vast piles of presents floated.

They, and the Doctor, were gazing at the exterior of the TARDIS (now the only one on the green). Cans hung off it, balloons were tied to the light on top, and 'Just Married' was scrawled across the front door in white paint.

'Kitai,' murmured Keri. 'So he's about somewhere, yeah?' She handed Jason the box of photos. 'He left these.'

As Jason laughed and showed Bernice the first image, a shout came from the road by the green. Chris, looking very tired, was being led towards the TARDIS by Ishtar and Roz.

248

'His first hangover,' Roz told the others. 'I'm proud to have been there.'

'Don't talk so loudly,' groaned Chris.

With a roar of engines and a screech of brakes, much to Chris's discomfort, Dorothée's vast motorcycle came to a halt beside the TARDIS. On the back sat Jason's double.

'Hoi!' Dorothée called. 'Don't sneak off without saying goodbye!'

The Doctor smiled at her. 'Has Audrey gone home?'

'Yeah.' Dorothée put a hand to her mirrorshades and winced. 'And Robin.

But I've got their coordinates, and we're gonna visit at Christmas. Me and her have got so much more in common now. . . '

Jason shook the other Jason's hand. 'Good luck, you lucky devil.'

'And you, you lucky devil.'

Bernice hugged her. 'And thank you for the condoms.'

The girl on the bike winked. 'Good luck, guys, see you Professor. . . '

Dorothée gunned the engine on the bike and sped away in the direction of a wall.

Just as the clone Jason yelled, the bike vanished with a crackle of static, off into space and time.

'Goodbye, Ace. . . ' murmured the Doctor.

'Outer space. . . ' Ishtar wrapped an arm around Chris's waist.

'Baboon,' he agreed.

'Well. . . ' The Doctor glanced at Ishtar uncomfortably, unlocking the door of the TARDIS. 'We should be off. I'll pop back for Kitai, and any others I've missed. Chris, if you want to –'

'No.' Ish put her fingers to Chris's lips. 'Goodbye, Chris.' She kissed him at length, and passionately, and then stopped. 'Goodbye.'

Chris opened his mouth, but couldn't say anything. He settled on quickly kissing her again, then turned on his heel, and marched inside the TARDIS.

Roz slapped him on the back and followed, ushering Keri with her. The presents, as if of their own accord, followed.

'Give your Mum our love,' Bernice told Ishtar. There had been a tearful farewell that morning. She held up the time ring on her finger. 'Apparently we can visit by knocking these together, so divorce equates with being marooned.'

'We'll, erm, take them off before we go to bed,' Jason said, and winked at Ish. The happy couple, arm in arm, entered the TARDIS.

The Doctor looked at Ishtar. 'Are you sure you don't want to come with us?'

Ishtar shrugged. 'No. Got all these space-time powers, but they don't help with exams. And Mum would kill me.'

'Oh. All right.' The Doctor was about to enter the TARDIS, then turned back. 'Nothing ever goes quite the way you plan, does it?' He grinned, and closed the door after him.

249

Ishtar watched as, with a clank, the wheezing, groaning sound began,

and the blue box faded away, leaving a white patch on the grass of the village green. The balloons, detached, floated off up into the sky.

Ishtar watched them go, and then turned for home.

She had something to tell her family.

The Brigadier and his wife, Yates, Benton, Hamlet and Ruby had gathered to watch the UNIT vans loading up the catering equipment.

'We got a thank-you note.' Doris held up the card that had appeared on the bedside table that morning.

'So did we, dear lady.' Macbeth produced his own card. 'That is something I would never have expected.'

'Well, that is the Doctor's speciality.' The Brigadier turned to call to the soldiers, who were manhandling an oven into the back of a lorry. 'Careful there!'

His glance left the truck as a sound came from the woods. The stubby shape of Kadiatu's craft rose over the trees, shimmered for a moment and then vanished. He saluted in time for her to see it.

But now he knew that he'd see her again. In the future.

'I suppose he's gone again?' Ruby sighed.

'Some of us go with him,' Yates told her. 'And some of us never do. And they also serve, Ruby.'

'Too right.' Benton grinned, nudging his former CO.

'But we're all changed by him, aren't we, Brigadier?'

'What? Oh, yes, I see what you mean, Captain. . . Mike. Very much so.'

The Brigadier picked up his walking stick, and threw it lightly into the rear of Benton's Bentley. Then he paused, considering Hamlet Macbeth. 'Mr Macbeth, Miss Duvall. Have you ever considered becoming, shall we say, gamekeepers?

I'm sure we could fit you in somewhere in UNIT.'

Macbeth opened his mouth in shock. 'I. . . we. . . '

‘Yes.’ Ruby nodded quickly. ‘We say yes.’

‘We?’ Doris looked at the Brigadier. ‘You’re not going to ask for your old job back?’

‘Why not?’ The Brigadier raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m sure I’ll pass the interview.’

Laughing and shaking their heads, the now extended UNIT family got in their cars and headed home for a cup of tea.

‘You’re what?’ Emily’s spectacles had literally flown from her hands when she heard the news.

‘Pregnant,’ Ishtar sighed.

250

Peter sat down heavily on the sofa, his face empty of all expression. Emily sat down beside him.

Ishtar went and sat between them. ‘But it’s really all right. I knew I was going to be before I even met Chris. The baby’s going to do a lot of good in the Reconstruction, and have a really good life. Everything’s going to be fine.’

‘What. . . ’ Emily distantly put her hand on top of Ishtar’s head. ‘What’s my granddaughter going to be called?’

‘I never said it would be a daughter,’ said Ishtar. ‘But I’m going to call her Jasmine Surprise. And her boyfriend, if everything goes to plan’ – she started to laugh at the look on Peter’s face – ‘will be called Ricky.’

And so Cheldon Bonniface returned to normality, relaxed in the revelation that it had experienced. The knowledge of aliens, of the good they’d done, spread far beyond the village. Long after the signs of the Traveller camp had faded, long after Watson’s journal of the events had been found and published, the story, that there was something out there, and, while there was the possibility of bad in it, there was also the possibility of good, remained. It was retold, time after time, and, strangely for stories that humans tell, the funny and good things about it were magnified in the telling. Especially as the weather got better.

There was, however, one story that went untold, in this whole knot of tales.

It concerned the Doctor and Alexander Shuttleworth, on the night of the reception, after the Doctor had arrived back at the hall on Bernice's arm.

He'd gravitated to Alexander, who was by now starting to feel guilty and champagne-ethical, and was telling saRa!qava that he shouldn't have led him on, and that there was somebody special at home. SaRa! qava had reacted to the news with an awesome lack of concern, and had just started chuckling.

Alexander didn't look particularly pleased.

So the Doctor appeared beside him, and led him off into a corner. He explained that he'd kept his distance a little, wanting Alexander to be there, since he'd been such a good friend to Bernice, but not wanting –

Before he could tell him to stop, Alexander told the Doctor everything that he so wanted to know. About her new cat, and her new job, and her new friends, and how she had not become burdened or bowed, but had kept that tiny human strength of hers and *gone on*.

If there was a message that he wanted to send. . . ?

The Doctor looked at him for a long time. 'Only. . . that I'm still learning.'

The Doctor spent the rest of the night dancing and talking with his friends, and holding Bernice's hand.

Being happy.

* * *

251

Jason and Bernice were handing the wedding photos out to Roz and Chris, around a little table in the TARDIS console room. The Doctor had been wandering about, now that he'd dropped Keri off, delighted to have his original ship back. He was, however, making the occasional tutting noise at the mess that the Charrl had left it in.

Jason laughed at a photo of Keri sneezing, and handed it to Roz. Then he got to the last shot in the box.

He stared at it. Then he held it up and yelled. 'Doctor!'

The Doctor wandered over, and plucked it out of his hand. His

expression moved from anger to a wry acceptance. ‘Oh dear,’ he murmured. ‘I ought to have known that attempts at closure very rarely succeed.’

He put the photo on the table.

It showed the Master, standing in front of a haystack.

Waving goodbye.

Deep in the catacombs of Gallifrey, where, in dark cells, the very worst and darkest of Time Lord criminals are kept, an odd little noise rang out.

‘ *Choo!* ’

Then there was silence for a moment.

Then there came a scream.

It sounded – if any of the Guards who rushed to see what it was had been able to make the comparison – like a very startled hamster.

February 1998. With the size of his family increasing all the time, Danny Paripski, formerly Danny Pain, who got on it only reluctantly, had finally reached the top of the housing ladder. They’d moved into a council house in Walthamstow, he and Helen and all the sons and daughters. Danny was starting to get requests to produce, one by a very big band that he couldn’t as yet tell anybody about. Probably Kit’s doing, somewhere along the line.

Cob was sub-letting, quite illegally, in the back bedroom, and every morning for exactly one hour between eleven and twelve he kept in practice on the drums.

So that was when Danny took his youngest, the only one still at home in the daytime, out in her pram.

The streets of Walthamstow were leafy and wet with the sludge of old snow.

Danny’s breath made clouds as he pushed the little one along, adjusting her woollies to make sure she was warm. He thought what a good summer it was going to be, with a whole new life opening up in front of them.

He stopped to tie the lace on his boot, just at the corner with the main

road that led out past the dog track.

* * *

252

The truck was actually a removal lorry, with a driver who was hurrying, late for his clients.

He was putting his foot down, trying to beat the lights as they went to amber. He accelerated towards them. He was going to make it and beat the camera.

Then he died, quite suddenly, his mind snipped off by a cerebral haemor-rhage.

His limp hands flew free of the wheel, and his weight slumped forward, foot on to the pedal.

Danny, kneeling, and the pram were centred in the window as the lorry drove randomly up on to the pavement at full speed.

Danny hadn't heard anything. He was lost in thought.

Then he heard something from a window. A radio.

It was playing 'Summer Breeze', and that took him back a year, as he stood up, to a warm occasion.

And how he'd enjoyed playing with the band again.

What he thought in the next second he was never really certain of. It was a thought that never got an end, or any punctuation, was just caught as a single frame from our usual messy brain movie, and so was without the editing of later thoughts, because of what happened next.

Something about weddings being like christenings and funerals. Trinities, or something, the only three services. Come along at once.

He reached out and took his daughter up into his arms.

And the lorry took the pram aside and mashed it into its cab and a lamppost.

Danny stood there.

And then, as the shocked often do, he took his daughter and just walked away.

He felt, strangely, that he had been given a gift.

The TARDIS spun through space and time. Once he had left Bernice and Jason on the world they had chosen for their honeymoon, and Roz and Chris had turned in for the night, the Doctor sat down and unwrapped Muldwych's gift.

It was a book with a purple spine. He smiled when he saw the cover.

*The Unformed Heart*

*by*

*Emily Hutchings*

*A Jasmine Romance*

'You made the right decision, O'Kelly Isley,' he murmured. He read the first sentences:

253

*The bells woke Bernice. She smiled at the low light that was illuminating the little back bedroom. Then she glanced at the side of Jason's face. . .*

Then he flipped to the last page, and read the last line: *Bernice and Jason, and their children, visited the Hutchings family often in the next decade. And every time they arrived, they were older, but also happy.*

The publication date was 2020. Typical Emily, to keep putting it aside, to keep looking for an ending. Wolsey hopped up on to his lap, and he closed the book and put it down to pet the cat.

'I thought so,' the Doctor murmured. 'But I'm glad that I know now. I do like a happy ending.'

He got to his feet, and carried the cat off to the TARDIS kitchen to get it some cheese.

**Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield** We decided on Plautus for our honeymoon because of the weather. There's lots of it, all sorts, as much as any weather enthusiast could want. The planet has seasons that last about three of our Earth days, so you get a lot of variety.

Needless to say, the villa which the Doctor had rented for us, halfway up the side of a wonderful arboreal valley, provided a wonderful view of the changing colours and textures below.

When I got the chance to see them, that is. Jason being Jason (and, all right, dear reader, as I've been lucky enough to recently discover, me being me), we spent most of the time making wonderful love. I told the top of his head, at one particularly wonderful point, that I wanted to have his children.

He seemed to believe it. Ho hum.

As I write, we're sitting here in big comfortable chairs, watching the sunset from the balcony. He's just about to fall asleep, and he's beautiful, and I'm married to him, and I love him. Soon, we'll start using the time rings to explore, and see the rest of the system, and (oh, how romantic), try and get in a bit of archaeology. Mars beckons also, of course. We have a diplomatic function or two to attend there, and Keri wants to show us her home properly.

Máire and the Travellers are supposed to be holding a party, and Dorothée and Jason 2: The Revenge, are going. It'd be good to see them all again.

Doubtless with hilarious results. It will be good, once the two of us know what we're about, to get back to the Doctor again. Being his companion, I 254

think, isn't something that ever stops; and even being one of the few people to be able to say: 'Death? Been there, done that,' with all the danger and all, I wouldn't ever give up the chance to travel with him.

There remains, of course, Dad.

I'm glad that Emily's thoughts on the closure of marriage turned out to be wrong, at least in my own case, because I think I've got it right. Now we're together, we've got all sorts of possibilities opening out in front of us, a lot of new lives, and I don't feel that anything's over. The presents have been an adventure in themselves: Martian treasure, numerous liquors from those who know me well, and some chocolate concoctions of Leonardo's that are at least as addictive as warlock.

But hush. I look at Jason in the chair over there, and I can see us getting old together, and always finding new things to enjoy about each other. Outside, it's becoming Winter, but soon it'll be Spring again. Perhaps I've been lucky, or blessed, by whatever god, gods or

goddesses there are. I've found someone who continually reminds me of who I'd like to be.

And a love, for all seasons.

255

**O**pposites Attract

WORDS and MUSIC by

PAUL CORNELL and EWAN DOWE

INTRODUCTION (Spoken)

They say opposites attract

But it's a fatal fact

That too opposite can equally be wrong

It's a very awful riddle

This searching for the middle

But grey areas are often best for songs. . .

So

Piano

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There’s nothing wrong in roughing it

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And he’ll dump you before you can dump him

His temper may be fissile

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he’s got a place in

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chin might be all bristle

Though leonine, we couldn’t call him brave And though

More than the sum of his

parts And curse yourself but love him so you do There’s a

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set the dog on us

We won’t call him monogamous

What reputation’s ours we care to

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and gentle centre

To his impedimenta

But finding it’s like wrestling with

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Try to take the smooth with the rough Ms Summerfield

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Try to get some moi with your vous

Just don’t try to grin and bear it

Òr you’ll just trip and tear it

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At least these days you’ve got the choice of two You might drink like you’re a pelican,

save

In which case it’s just as well he can,

glue

Carry you home from a night out in your cups

And though your rows get shriller,

That’s a sign He’ll never kill Her,

And all the downs get balanced out with ups

But in the end it's mystically,

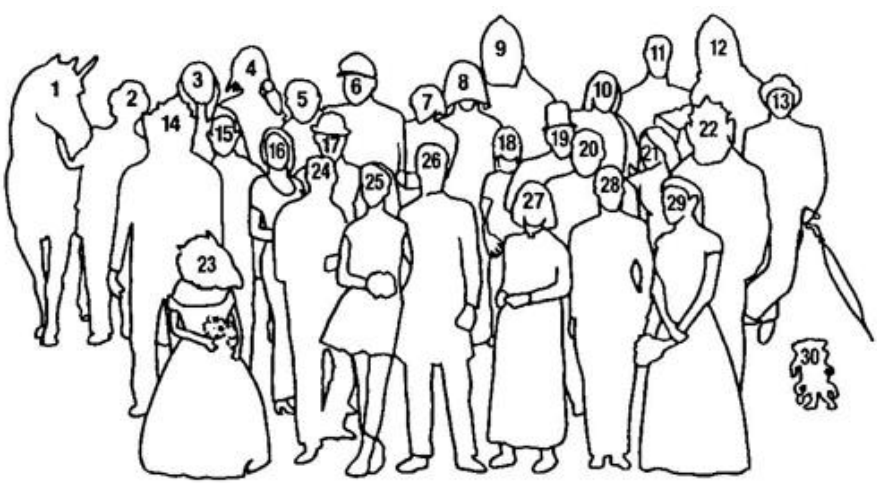
That tragedy breeds comedy,

And romance springs from such unlikely roots

You both know what you're about

And you shouldn't get a moment's doubt

From two camp lizards dressed in dinner suits!




**1.** Bat **2.** The Doctor **3.** Muldwych **4.** Kadiatu **5.** William Blake **6.** The Brigadier **7.** Doris **8.** Lord Savaar **9.** Skog **10.** Lisa Deranne **11.** Braxiatel **12.** Sskeet **13.** The Doctor **14.** Sanki **15.** Danny Pain **16.**

Ruby Duvall **17.** Hamlet Macbeth **18.** The Master of the Land of Fiction **19.** Sherlock Holmes **20.** Dr Watson **21.** Máire **22.** Jacquilian **23.** Keri **24.** Chris Cwej **25.** Bernice Summerfield **26.** Jason Kane **27.** Rev. Annie Trelaw **28.** Roz Forrester **29.** Dorothée McShane **30.** Sgloomi Po

# HAPPY ENDINGS

AN ORIGINAL DOCTOR WHO NOVEL

**'DOCTOR, THIS IS MY FIANCE. PLEASE DON'T KILL HIM.'**

You are cordially invited to the wedding of Mr Jason Kane and Professor Bernice S. Summerfield, to be held in the village of Cheldon Bonniface in the year 2010.

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